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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LEARNING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:
ADULT LEARNER PERCEPTIONS

BY

© PATRICIA ANN CONRAD

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

IN

ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER, AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL, 1991

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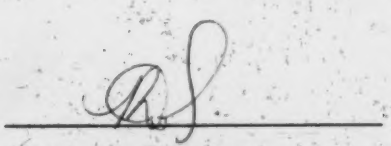

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION.

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D. COLLETT, PhD.

M. RODDA, PhD.

Date: July 9, 1991

DEDICATION

With love, to my mother Hendrika, a wise and caring Deaf woman

who taught me the most important lessons in life.

And with admiration, to all the adult learners who undertake the challenge of

learning American Sign Language, & to all the Deaf instructors

who undertake the challenge of teaching them.

ABSTRACT

The teaching of American Sign Language (ASL) is a relatively new discipline within adult education. The purpose of this exploratory study was to illuminate the experiences of adult learners of ASL, and in so doing, to add to knowledge in the field, assist planners of ASL programs, and to offer a base for further investigation. Suggested revisions to a specific program were elicited.

In a qualitative approach, individual interviews were conducted with a sample of learners enrolled in a community college ASL program. Subjects were purposively selected on the basis of consistent study within the program, and ability and willingness to relate their personal perceptions. A final selection process ensured a diversity of learner variables within the sample.

Data analysis revealed six descriptive patterns, or themes, common to all respondents: pursuit of individual goals, changing views of ASL and the Deaf community, transition between languages, barriers to learning ASL, supports to learning ASL, and personal growth. Desired program changes further reflected personal needs. A discussion of findings noted similarities between the ASL experience and related areas such as adult education, second language education and cross-cultural studies. At the same time, the exceptional nature of the ASL experience was made apparent in the cognitive, affective, and skill domains of learning. Implications for practice and further research in the field were offered.

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To the seven ASL learners who so willingly gave of their personal time to share their experiences with me, and in so doing offered us a glimpse of what it is really like to be an adult learner of ASL. Thank you also to the three former learners who participated in the pilot study, for their very useful feedback.

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their students, and for their enthusiastic and unhesitating cooperation throughout the study.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

American Sign Language (ASL) as a known means of communication within the Deaf community dates back to the early 19th century (Baker & Cokely, 1980; Gannon, 1981; Schein, 1989). However, ASL was not acknowledged as a distinct language until 1960, a mere three decades ago (Stokoe, 1978; Baker & Battison, 1980).

Formal programs offering ASL to hearing adults are a more recent development. Though still in its infancy, ASL instruction parallels second language teaching in many respects. Exposure to native language models, the immersion approach, the study of culture, and the emphasis on conversational fluency are some of the common features. More apparent, however, are the distinctions:

> (ASL) employs entirely different sensory and motor systems in reception and production, and this difference appears to be related to a different organization of processing in the brain (Armstrong, 1984: 181; reiterated by Sacks, 1989).

What, then, is the experience of learning a visual, spatial language for adults familiar only with spoken, sequential languages? What is the perceived process of language acquisition? How do they feel when using ASL? What kinds of learning are perceived as most important in an ASL program? These are questions that demand answers for effective program planning. They can

be answered only by adult learners themselves.

According to current literature in adult education, adult learners are a diverse group (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Kidd, 1988; Cranton, 1989), bringing a variety of life experiences, abilities, motivations, assumptions, and opinions to the learning setting.

> In the days to come, we will have to accept that there is *no single pedagogical answer, only the answer of many individuals*. Language teachers must learn humility. They will have to abandon the authoritarian approach of "*designing* the program to meet their students' needs" as they see them, in favor of discovering first how the students perceive their needs, and then considering what contribution they can make, as teachers and course designers, to meeting these needs. We must stop thinking we know and start finding out (italics theirs, Rivers, 1983: 137)

This study viewed the experience of learning ASL through the eyes of the adult learner. This perspective is a crucial one for developing ASL programs that truly meet the needs of the client group.

Statement of the Problem

What constitutes the experience of learning ASL for individual hearing adult learners in a community college ASL program, and how could the experience be enhanced?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine, interpret and describe the experience of learning ASL from the perspectives of several adult participants

in the ASL Program at Grant MacEwan Community College (GMCC). The study also elicited learner suggestions for desired change to the program.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What were learner expectations, assumptions and personal goals on program entry, and how have they changed during the period of ASL study?

2. How do learners perceive their language learning processes, and what personal strategies do they use to increase their learning?

3. What are learner perceptions of their own achievement in learning ASL?

4. What are reactions to the instructional styles, learning activities, and resources in the program, and what changes would learners suggest?

Assumptions of the Study

1. That learner experiences could be ascertained through interviews.

2. That learners would be open and honest in their responses to interview questions.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was delimited to seven adult learners currently studying ASL in the Grant MacEwan Community College program. No attempt was made to

find reasons for their experiences, nor was any attempt made to draw comparisons between achievement and individual experiences, or between learner experiences at different levels of the program.

The study was limited by participants' abilities to fully recall and express their feelings and perceptions, and by my own own interviewing skills.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions applied:

1. American Sign Language: refers to the natural visual/gestural language used by North American Deaf people. It is recognized as a distinct language, separate from English, with its own unique grammar and inflections (Stokoe, 1978; Baker & Cokely, 1980).

2. Deaf (upper case first letter): refers to people with a hearing loss who use ASL and identify with the culture of the Deaf Community. (deaf, lower case first letter, refers to those with a hearing loss who may or may not use ASL, but do not identify with the Deaf Community and culture.) (Baker & Cokely, 1980)

3. Second language: refers to a language which is in general use in the community in which the learner lives and works, so that it is possible to interact with speakers of that language and with the target culture (Rivers, 1983; Cooper, 1985).

4. Immersion: refers to a learning situation in which the instructor is a native speaker of the target language, and only the target language is used for

instruction and interaction. In this particular study, all the instructors are Deaf, and only American Sign Language is used. English is permitted in the written form (for specified exercises), but not at all in the voiced form.

Need for the Study

Literature in the field reveals that little research has addressed the personal learning experiences of adults in second language, and in particular visual second language programs. Qualitative studies in the form of diary studies and mentalistic research have addressed only spoken language learning. Aside from requiring further investigation to generalize results, these studies are at best peripherally applicable to the ASL learning experience. Recent developments in the Deaf community and the related growth of interest in ASL programs suggest that this is a growing educational discipline that warrants further research.

This study sought to add to knowledge of the visual second language learner perspective, and thus offer a base for expanded studies. With a clearer picture of the learner experience, ASL program planners and instructors will be better equipped to provide more effective programs.

Adult learners can offer important data to program enhancement efforts, not only by their willingness to enroll, classroom behavior and achievements, and written course evaluations, but by sharing their reactions to the experience of learning. No two reactions will be the same. In the words of Lynn Davie of

the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE): "Each stakeholder places the learning into a unique set of values and thus judges the significance of the learning from his or her own perspective" (Boud & Griffin, 1987: 206). Menges (in Walker, 1976) sees learners not as "judges", but "reporters":

> They can report on their feelings concerning language study, on what they observe the teacher do, on their reactions to the materials and methods used, and on what they see to be useful in the curriculum. Although they may not be qualified to judge the skills of the teacher, they can report the effect of these skills (or lack of them) have on them as learners. . . they can indicate what would be interesting and useful to them within the framework of their own goals as opposed to the goals of the teacher (Walker, 1976: 136).

On a more practical and immediate level, the Projects Manager of the ASL program at Grant MacEwan Community College expressed an interest in better understanding the adult viewpoint on learning ASL in the college classes. The intent of this study was to furnish information not currently available to the program. Since the program inception twelve years ago, informal instructor suggestions and written student feedback have provided a basis for minor adjustments; however, a more comprehensive picture of the "real" learning experience was perceived as one useful tool in further program revision.

Beyond non-credit, general interest ASL programs such as this one, new data may impact related programs; two such programs in the local area are the Interpreter Training Program at GMCC and the Hearing Impaired Program at the University of Alberta. As ASL gains credibility and draws more public interest,

and as Deaf citizens become more involved in every facet of community life, the need for more and better ASL programs, and hence more specifically focused research studies, increases accordingly.

The remainder of the thesis is organized in the following manner. Chapter 2 provides an introductory review of related literature, followed in Chapter 3 by a description of research methodology. Chapters 4 and 5 address research findings, and Chapter 6 offers a discussion of the results in terms of the relevant literature. Summary and implications provide the focus for Chapter 7; recommendations for further research are also outlined.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The intent of this chapter is to provide a basic background to the study. Review of the literature begins with a general discussion of current knowledge in second language education, primarily as it might be applied to visual language learning. Teaching-learning models and naturalistic studies of the second language learning experience are examined. Next, the specific area of ASL education is addressed, with a chronology of the development of ASL to its current status, and a brief history of prevalent ASL instructional trends.

Second Language Education

Second Language Teaching-Learning Models

> Certainly this is a burgeoning field, and much has been but sketchily researched at present; positions are taken and abandoned somewhat rapidly as experimental data are reexamined and reinterpreted (Rivers, 1983: 167).

Countless theories and models have been applied to second language pedagogy. Some, overly simplistic or restrictive, have been discarded; others are retained in original or modified form, or in combination with others. Several that may apply to visual language learning are described below.

Linguistic perspectives account for the majority of theories in recent years. The Interlanguage theory, one example dating back to the early 1970's (McLaughlin, 1987), suggests that interim grammatical structures develop

during the transition to competency in the target language. The "interlanguage" system is viewed as distinct from both first and second languages. Developmental features, according to this theory, include language transfer, strategies for learning and communication, and overgeneralization in the target language.

The Universal Grammar theory, another linguistic perspective, refers to the presence of general principles or rules that apply not to one particular language, but to all languages (McLaughlin, 1987). This Chomskyan approach assumes that language learners bring innate universal linguistic knowledge to the second language acquisition task. "The claim is that certain principles of the human mind are, to a degree, biologically determined and specialized for language learning" (McLaughlin, 1987: 91). Those who endorse this notion in second language education must also accept that such "universal grammar" is still accessible to adult learners.

Krashen's Natural Approach, or Monitor Model (Gingras, 1978; Krashen, 1980; Nagle & Sanders, 1986; Horner, 1987; McLaughlin, 1987; Beebe, 1988) has as its primary aim the development of basic communication skills. Inherent in this model are five hypotheses:

1. The acquisition-learning hypothesis makes a clear distinction between second language "acquisition" and "learning."* The former is a

* For the purposes of this paper, "learning" and "acquisition" are used interchangeably.

subconscious process that grows from natural communication; it relies on "feeling" rather than "knowing." The latter is more explicit, the result of a conscious attempt at mastery.

2. The natural order hypothesis suggests that grammatical structures are learned in a predictable sequence.

3. The monitor hypothesis claims that the only function of conscious learning is to monitor performance in the target language, and negates the possibility of either convergence or transfer between the two separate phenomena. Implied here is the desirability of natural interaction with the target community, as a supplement to classroom activity.

4. The input hypothesis contends that language is acquired when the learner receives and understands input slightly beyond his current level of comprehension. Following an initial "silent period", expressive fluency will emerge gradually in the absence of direct instruction.

5. In his final hypothesis, the affective-filter hypothesis, Krashen describes a socio-affective filter which can impede language progress. Successful acquisition becomes possible when the filter, and hence the anxiety level, is lowered.

Of late, the Monitor model has faced considerable challenge in studies that suggest a distinct possibility of transfer from conscious to unconscious knowledge, with communicative practice as the stimulus for conversion (Rivers, 1983; Horner, 1987). The claim of extensive empirical data has also been

questioned (McLaughlin, 1987). Despite inadequacies and imperfections, the value of tentative contributions to a developing discipline should not be overlooked.

Schumann's Acculturation Model (Gingras, 1978; Larsen-Freeman, 1980; McLaughlin, 1987) incorporates psycho-social factors into another linguistic view of second language acquisition: language competency is a "natural" consequence of exposure to the appropriate cultural/linguistic environment. According to this model, the learner will acquire a second language only to the extent that he* acculturates with the target group. Minimal acculturation will yield continued use of an "interlanguage" in lieu of full competency. Formal instruction has no part in this model.

Hatch's Discourse Perspective (Larsen-Freeman, 1980) proposes conversation with native speakers of a second language as the dominant second language acquisition tool. Because of its simplicity, "foreigner talk", otherwise referred to as "interlanguage" or "pidgin", becomes the focal point for second language learning. Like other models which impose overly restrictive conditions for use, it is simply too rigid for general applicability; nonetheless, it does offer some further insight into second language learning.

The Cognitive theory (McLaughlin, 1987) views language acquisition as a broad and complex cognitive skill. Competency is marked by increasing

* For the sake of simplicity, "he" may denote either gender.

automaticity of language sub-skills. As performance improves with practice, restructuring of internal systems allows the learner greater control of the target language. As is the case with most current models, the Cognitive theory lacks sufficient empirical data to support it fully.

Recent years have seen a notable shift in second language teaching, from a largely structured to a more pragmatic, sociological view of language (Allen, 1983; Rivers, 1983; McLaughlin, 1987; Beebe, 1988). Given the diversity of learner variables encountered in most second language programs, current thinking appears to favor a synthesis of naturalist approaches and formal instructional approaches into practical communicative strategies. Littlewood (1984; McLaughlin, 1987), for example, proposes merging a creative construction model (based on input from exposure) with a skill-learning, instructional model (based on input from instruction) to focus on both conscious and unconscious processes. The resulting model, blending cognitive processing strategies and performance skills, may fluctuate in emphasis; either it will facilitate skill learning within the creative construction model, or vice versa. A further option accommodates both models within the larger framework of social learning theory, wherein learner variables such as motivation, practice, and feedback ultimately influence target language ability.

To provide adaptability to a variety of needs, Allen (1983), in a similar vein, proposes a three-tiered model of second language education that combines contemporary approaches. Components of this curriculum model

include a structural-analytic level (a formal skill-getting approach), a non-analytic level (a natural, functional, skill-using approach), and a functional-analytic mid-level (focusing on both formal structure and communicative competency goals). In accordance with the dominant goal of communicative fluency in the field today, a continual shifting of emphasis among the three perspectives would ideally produce an accomplished user of the target language.

Such models are by no means the final resolution to ongoing debate among theorists. They are simply current examples of a broader framework that emphasizes similarities among theories, de-emphasizes differences, and strives for the flexibility to accommodate the needs of a wider range of learners.

Qualitative Studies in Second Language Education

The literature indicates that studies of second language learning are primarily dominated by "outside" perspectives . Little research relates directly to the adult learner's own "inside" perception of the learning experience. Currently, however, naturalistic study of the learner perspective is re-emerging as part of a trend toward better understanding of second language learning processes.

> As researchers have become increasingly interested in investigating the strategies used in learning a second or foreign language, there has been a growing interest in using learners' reports of their own intuitions and insights as a complement to classroom observations and other measures (Fraerch & Kasper, 1987: 82).

Recent qualitative research includes several participant ethnographic

studies in the form of introspective diary studies. In diary studies, the researcher/learner records everything felt to be influential during the learning process, including interaction with classmates, learning strategies used, frustrations, fears, successes and failures. Schumann's introspective journal study (1977) identified psychological variables during the study of Arabic and Persian in the Middle East. Daily documentation by two researchers over a two-month period noted affective reactions toward foreign cultures, target language users, and instructional methods. Subsequent data analysis revealed six learning variables including nesting patterns, transition anxiety, reactions to pedagogical techniques, motivation for choice of materials, desire to maintain one's own learning agenda, and eavesdropping vs. speaking as a learning strategy. Schumann further pinpointed *competition* vs. *cooperation* as a dominant trend in her learning experience, with her husband as a class peer and thus a "competitor." In the case of this learner, cooperation was viewed as more conducive to her learning than competitiveness.

In a similar study, Bailey (1977) traced her personal response to learning French. Emergent themes from her journal included: response to the learning environment, personal preference for a democratic teaching style, and a desire for success and positive feedback. Further analysis at a later date (Bailey, 1983) revealed feelings of competitiveness and anxiety that she perceived as related to fluctuating confidence levels during the classes, fear of public failure, and feelings of inadequacy when comparing herself to classmates. In a

subsequent review of ten diary studies, Bailey (1983) cited parallel experiences in several. These include:

1. Overt self-comparison of the language learner
2. Emotive responses to the comparisons in (1) above
3. A desire to out-do other language learners
4. Emphasis on or concern with tests and grades
5. A desire to gain the teacher's approval
6. Anxiety experienced during the language lesson
7. Withdrawal from the language learning experience (93-94).

Bailey offered a dual perspective on the anxiety factor in a competitive learner. As a motivator in the language learning class, moderate anxiety may play a facilitating function; conversely, higher levels of anxiety may have a debilitating effect on the learner's progress.

Rivers (1983), in another personal case study, offered introspective observations on her learning processes, strategies, and affective reactions related to the study of Spanish in South America. In one sample diary entry, she noted the lag of language reception behind expression: "I ask directions to the church. I come out with my little Spanish phrases quite confidently but cannot understand the replies" (1983: 172). Personal learning strategies were cited as well: "I realize the value of practicing saying things over to develop fluency and to keep thinking in the language" (1983: 171).

Schmidt and Frota's diary study (Schmidt & Frota, 1986; Beebe, 1988) provided a more cognitive perspective, with a trained linguist serving as a research subject learning Brazilian Portuguese. To provide some measure of objectivity, retrospective analyses of recorded speech samples supplemented

the researcher's personal journal. This learner-researcher cited a tendency to notice linguistic forms outside the classroom more readily after formal teaching, reiterating the value of both natural and instructional approaches.

Although case studies reveal data previously inaccessible, "the methodology is too new and the literature is too limited for us to be able to draw final conclusions about the utility of journal studies" (Rivers, 1983: 64-65). Bailey (1983) suggested that such introspective studies could play a useful role in identifying and possibly counteracting some affective and psychological obstacles to second language learning. "Ultimately, if we can use the diaries to identify the events and emotions leading up to the changes in affect, we may be able to control or induce such changes" (Bailey, 1983: 98). Generalizability of diary studies is understandably constrained, given their idiosyncratic nature. However, such exploratory research can provide a solid foundation for further study:

> If we consider diary research as preliminary to more controlled, experimental studies, then our basic purpose is to generate new hypotheses. By combining these SL diary studies, we simply expand the data base: the more studies reviewed, the more hypotheses we may produce (Bailey and Ochsner, 1980: 188).

Further anthropological observation methods, or "mentalistic" techniques, include verbal data reports, "thinking aloud", self-observation, and both introspective and retrospective oral interviews (Cohen & Hosenfield, 1981; Faerch & Kasper, 1987; Cohen, 1990). One college study of learner strategies (Hosenfield, 1976; Cohen & Hosenfield, 1981) described an oral self-

observation and self-report procedure with responses prompted by an interviewer. Data analysis of 23 transcribed self-reports revealed not only that college learners were able to articulate their learning strategies, but that actual strategies used in the classroom diverged considerably from those assumed by teachers.

A study sponsored by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) addressed some characteristics of the "good language learner" (Naiman et al, 1978; Fraerch & Kasper, 1987). 34 adult language learners, both "good" and "poor", were questioned about their language learning views, experiences, and strategies. Naiman and his fellow researchers "felt that only through interviews could one have access to techniques that were invisible to anyobservers. . ." (Fraerch & Kasper, 1987: 83). A number of shared attributes were identified as characteristic of successful second language learners. Among these were a positive attitude to language learning, active involvement, persistence, risk-taking, and adaptability.

An alternate form of self-observation research involves interruption of learner activities for an immediate and spontaneous account of conscious thought processes (Cohen & Hosenfield, 1981; Cohen, 1990); this approach assumes that adult learners can be trained to verbalize mental processes. Resulting verbal reports may be either introspective or retrospective, depending on the time lapse before response. In studies conducted with college and adult school students, findings indicated that often several thoughts were processed

simultaneously, and prioritized. This may explain why "what teachers teach is not necessarily learned" (Cohen, 1990: 147).

It would seem that what teachers observe or assume and what actually occurs within the cognitive and affective realms of their students' learning experiences may diverge considerably. The learner, clearly, is a rich data source. Used in conjunction with other methods, or as a basis for further study, "qualitative research is invaluable if our goal is to consider the individual learner as a whole person, not just a hypothetical entity in an anonymous language learning process" (Fraerch & Kasper, 1987: 269).

ASL Education

The History of ASL

Long oppressed and often misunderstood as a language, ASL has in recent years achieved some measure of recognition and acceptance by hearing society. A brief look at historical influences may provide a better understanding of its current status.

The known use of ASL in North America can be traced back almost two centuries, to the arrival of Laurent Clerc from France (Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Baker & Cokely, 1980; Gannon, 1981; Schein, 1989). A collaborative effort by Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet established the first American school for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817. Consequently, the present form of ASL displays dominant elements of French Sign Language (FSL):

> The French sign system imported by Clerc rapidly amalgamated with the indigenous sign languages here . . . to form a uniquely expressive and powerful hybrid, American Sign Language (ASL) (Sacks, 1989: 23).

There are no written records of the period prior to 1817, and information about ASL use before this time is sketchy. Between 1817 and 1880, a number of schools for the Deaf opened and for a period of time the language flourished peacefully within the Deaf community (Gannon, 1981).

Just over a century ago, the use of sign language in schools was dealt a major blow. In 1880, the International Congress on Education of the Deaf convened in Milan, Italy, where a resolution was adopted by members to ban the use of sign language in teaching Deaf students (Gannon, 1981). For the next 80 years, the oral approach, then perceived as superior to the manual approach, replaced ASL in Deaf education. Despite the lack of recognition and the widespread stigma attached to it, the language survived as the primary means of communication among Deaf adults.

Following years of suppression, 1960 heralded a reformation of the general perception of sign language (Stokoe, 1978; Baker & Battison, 1980). With the first ever scientific analysis of the language, by American linguist William Stokoe, ASL was designated a true language – complex, syntactically discrete, and complete as an expressive tool. This marked a major breakthrough; prior to Stokoe's study, ASL had been perceived as crude gestures, "broken English", or at best a manually coded form of English. Further efforts by researchers over the past three decades have increased the mass of

available literature on ASL (Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Baker & Battison, 1980; Baker & Cokely, 1981).

The emerging recognition of Deaf culture (Baker & Battison, 1980; Baker & Cokely, 1980, Padden & Humphries, 1988), with its distinct traditions, values, and behavioral norms, continued to shift the perception of the community, both by outside viewers and its own members, in a positive direction. With increased acceptance of ASL and Deaf culture came a gradual empowerment of the Deaf community. Here the words of Paulo Freire are apt:

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (1972: 34).

Never before has this sentiment been more pervasive in the Deaf population. The Gallaudet University revolt of 1988, in which students rallied in demand of a Deaf president (Gannon, 1989; Sacks, 1989), marked a further shift in how the community and its language are viewed. Sacks quotes the sentiments of one Gallaudet researcher:

> . . . now all at once there's been a transformation in the consciousness of what it means to be a deaf person in the world, to take responsibility for things. The illusion that deaf people are powerless - all at once, now, that illusion has gone. . . (Sacks, 1989: 155).

Deaf education, too, is feeling the impact. Current research re-examining the age-old issue of illiteracy among Deaf learners (Carver, 1989; Johnson et al, 1989) has revealed oppressive education practices such as language-related lack of access and low academic expectations, and paved the way for

innovative approaches at all educational levels. In Manitoba, for example, the Deaf Human Service Worker Training Program operated for several years as an alternative post-secondary educational model. ASL was used as the instructional language, and Deaf culture was both acknowledged and supported (Evans & Mitchell, 1989). In Edmonton, the Alberta School for the Deaf in 1990 initiated a novel bilingual/bicultural model that employs both ASL and English as languages of instruction.

In the political arena, the Alberta Legislature has followed Manitoba's lead with the recent unanimous acceptance of a resolution:

> 1) to recognize ASL as the language of the deaf in Alberta and
> 2) to incorporate it into Alberta's grade school and postsecondary curriculum as an available language of instruction (Alberta Hansard, Number 96, 1990: 2023).

Acceptance of the language goes hand in hand with acceptance of the people who use it. Conceivably, a more positive perception of the language along with increased public awareness and interest will have a positive impact on the learning experience of hearing adults who undertake the study of ASL.

The Teaching of ASL

The teaching of ASL as a second language to hearing adults is relatively new. It was not until Stokoe's linguistic research in 1960 that the status of ASL as a language was acknowledged, and a clear understanding of the intricacies of the language did not emerge until later (Table 1 summarizes highlights).

The first ASL classes provided little more than practice of vocabulary

Table 1
History of ASL & ASL Education: Highlights

1817	Laurent Clerc arrived from France, bringing the French influence to North American sign languages. From this, the present form of American Sign Language evolved.
1817 - 1880	A number of schools for the Deaf were established in North America. Manual communication thrived.
1880	The International Congress on Education of the Deaf convened in Milan, Italy, and banned the use of sign language in Deaf education. The use of ASL continued within the Deaf community.
1960	The first scientific analysis of ASL was undertaken by William Stokoe, and the language was awarded a new status.
1972	The first ASL teaching texts to address linguistic structure as well as vocabulary were published.
1980	A comprehensive teaching guide on ASL grammar, history, and culture was published.
1988	The Vista Curriculum, which focuses on communicative competency, cultural sensitivity, and interaction with the Deaf community, was published.
1988	The Gallaudet revolt, in which Deaf students demanded a Deaf president, increased public awareness of ASL and the Deaf community.
1990	The Western Maryland College Model Curriculum for Teachers of ASL was published.
1990	The Alberta Legislature passed a resolution to accept ASL as the official language of the Deaf community.
1991	The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) anticipates completion of the national Sign Language Instructors of Canada Evaluation (SLICE).

lists, with minimal emphasis on grammatical structure, and less on the cultural component. By 1972, publication of teaching texts that addressed basic linguistic structure as well as vocabulary became available (Fant, 1972; Madsen, 1972), and by 1980 a more complete teaching guide on history, grammar, and culture was published (Baker & Cokely, 1980). The Vista College ASL curriculum (Smith, 1988; Lentz et al, 1988), with its focus on communicative competency, cultural sensitivity, and interaction with the Deaf community, was yet another advance in the field. This curriculum forms the basis for many ASL programs in Canada and the USA today.

Who is qualified to teach ASL? Kanda and Fleischer (1988) identified some prerequisites:

> 1) Sign language teachers must respect the language and its history.
> 2) Sign language teachers should feel comfortable interacting with the Deaf community - demonstrating their fluency in ASL, as well as their knowledge and comfort with the culture.
> 3) Sign language teachers must be good teachers. They should have completed formal study of the language and of educational and pedagogical principles.
> 4) Sign language teachers should be familiar with second language teaching theory and methodology.
> 5) Sign language teachers should be engaged in personal and professional growth and development.
> 6) ASL teachers are human beings first, teachers second and teachers of ASL third (183-192).

Whether instructors should be Deaf or hearing is not specified. However, language fluency and comfort with the Deaf cultural environment is emphasized; it is logical to assume that these attributes would more likely be modelled by native than non-native ASL users.

Training programs offered to ASL teachers are almost non-existent. One such program was run in Canada in the summer of 1987. The University of New Brunswick in joint sponsorship with the New Brunswick Coordinating Council on Deafness offered an innovative three-week Sign Language Instructor Training Program (Brooke and MacManus, 1987). Twenty Deaf adults from across the country participated, studying Deaf culture, curriculum development, instructional techniques, second language instruction, and adult education for the purpose of teaching ASL to hearing adults. Although the project was deemed successful, it has not been continued in Canada. Presently, the only comprehensive graduate program for ASL instructor training in North America operates at Western Maryland College (Baker-Shenk, 1990).

Regulated standards of instructor preparation are receiving more attention. The national Sign Language Instructors of Canada Evaluation (SLICE) is currently being developed by the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD), and is expected to be underway by Fall, 1991 (Stratiy, 1990).

It would appear that adult learners pursuing the study of ASL today can expect more in terms of linguistic background, conversational skills training, cultural study, updated curriculum and materials, and refined instruction than two decades ago. The specific needs of hearing adult learners of a visual language, however, have received little attention thus far.

Summary

Review of the literature provides a relevant background to the proposed study. Current teaching-learning approaches in the field of second language education encompass a wide range of theoretical perspectives. While no one theory today can claim unanimous acceptance or consistent success, most offer some degree of insight into the learning process. Given the variability of learners, flexibility is the key to any adult education model. The need for further testing of existing theories, and the formulation of refined models, is evident.

Recent research exploring the second language learner experience is, similarly, somewhat tentative; theories have been suggested but rarely confirmed. As reiterated by Cohen & Hosenfield, the field is ripe for further investigation, both qualitative and quantitative:

> Given the limitations on insights about language learning gained from even the best empirical/extrospective observations of the learning process, we firmly endorse researching language learning by gathering mentalistic data regarding the learning process. A combination of both empirical and mentalistic approaches may well provide a more complete picture of what it means to learn a language (1981: 312).

American Sign Language, despite evidence of an uncertain and arduous history, can today claim credibility and recognition as a language. The teaching of ASL, although still in its infancy, has made notable strides over the past three decades, drawing upon current knowledge of second language education for much of its development. There are, however, significant differences between visual and spoken languages that would conceivably influence the experiences

of hearing ASL learners. Exploration of this data source is essential to expanding the knowledge base in a new field, providing a foundation for further studies, and ultimately ensuring more effective ASL programs.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Choice of Method

The boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research are tentative at best (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Sandelowski, 1986). The two approaches comprise continuous, often overlapping processes, ". . . an epistemological continuum, not a dichotomy" (Miles & Huberman, 1984: 21). In offering general guidelines to qualitative inquiry, Bogdan & Biklen acknowledge the "issue of degree":

> 1) Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument.
> 2) Qualitative research is descriptive.
> 3) Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products.
> 4) Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively.
> 5) "Meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach (1982: 27-29).

The literature reveals a number of attributes which typically distinguish a more qualitative, or naturalistic perspective from its more quantitative, or experimental counterpart (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Van Maanen, 1983; Ary et al, 1990). Qualitative proponents assert that the social or human sciences warrant a different mode of inquiry than natural or physical sciences, due to different subject matter. People are complex creatures with diverse perceptions of life; such experiences cannot be reduced

meaningfully to "facts" or numbers.

While experimental research seeks to objectively control extraneous influences and manipulate variables, qualitative inquiry recognizes human behavior as bound to the context in which it is found. The natural interplay of variables is viewed as reality. "Qualitative research. . . emphasizes the meaningfulness of the research product rather than control of the process" (Sandelowski, 1986: 29). Naturalistic inquiry is value-linked, and the subjective nature of both subject and researcher perceptions is acknowledged; multiple realities are possible, and likely.

Often the only instrument in a qualitative study is the investigator, and the research design is emergent rather than predetermined. Qualitative research is typically inductive; it strives to describe phenomena, generate conceptual categories from findings, and note associations among phenomena. Rather than testing or confirming new or existing theories in the deductive quantitative tradition, "ethnographers hope to find a theory that explains their data" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982: 34).

The ultimate aim of naturalistic inquiry is "to portray the complex pattern of what is being studied in sufficient depth and detail so that one who has not experienced it can understand it" (Ary et al, 1990: 445). The prospect of a more vivid understanding of a unique experience from the "insider's" perspective has prompted the choice of a qualitative design as the most appropriate for this exploratory study.

The Setting

The setting for this study is a non-credit, general interest American Sign Language program offered through the Community Education Division of Grant MacEwan Community College. At any given time, the program has approximately 225 learners in either four or five levels of instruction.

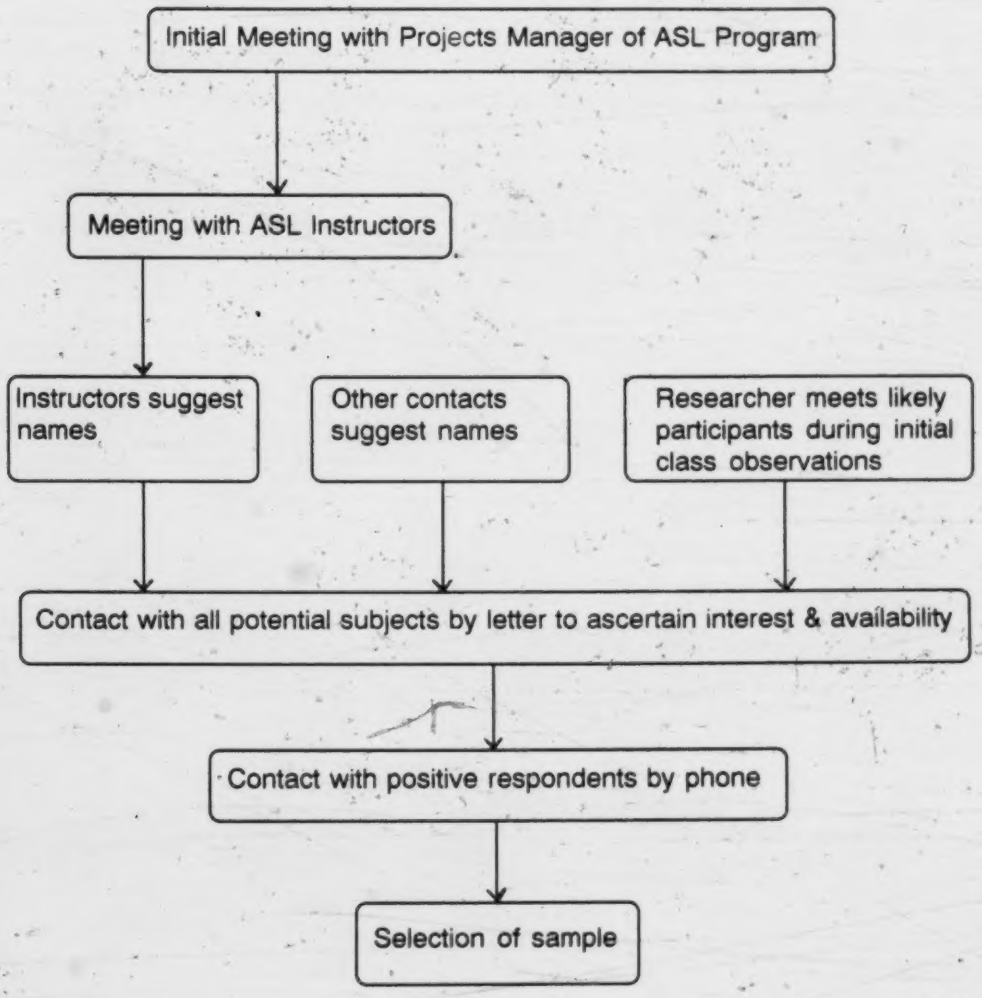
The program originated at the Mill Woods campus of GMCC in 1979, in response to community demand for a quality ASL program. This was to be the foundation for the Interpreter Training Program, established at the Cromdale campus of GMCC in 1984. In 1985, the ASL program was moved to its present site at the Cromdale campus. While the original objective remains, the program has expanded in an effort to accommodate a variety of needs.

Selection of Subjects

From the learners enrolled during the winter term of 1991, I selected seven to be informants in the study. As indicated in Figure 1, initial access to the program was granted following meetings with the Projects Manager and the ASL teaching staff. Once the research plan was approved, I requested the assistance of instructors in choosing learners from each level to serve as subjects. Since instructors were in direct contact with the students, I saw their involvement in the selection process as productive and time-saving.

Selection criteria were provided to all instructors:

Figure 1
Selection of Sample


Initial Meeting with Projects Manager of ASL Program
Meeting with ASL Instructors
Instructors suggest names
Other contacts suggest names
Researcher meets likely participants during initial class observations
Contact with all potential subjects by letter to ascertain interest & availability
Contact with positive respondents by phone
Selection of sample

1. The first criterion was consistent study within the program, to ensure collection of data that would be useful to a specific program, and to avoid the potential interference of other recent ASL learning experiences.

2. The second criterion was ability and willingness to freely relate personal feelings and opinions with me.

After the first three weeks of the winter term, based on their observations and/or dialogue with colleagues, instructors submitted names of several possible subjects. During classroom observations, I met more likely participants. Suggestions made by others having contact with the learners were also accepted for consideration. I then sent letters (Appendix B) via instructors to the identified learners, to ascertain interest and availability. Telephone contact was made with those expressing an interest in participating. During the initial phone contact with likely subjects, I outlined purpose and procedures before a decision to participate was requested. This included an estimate of the projected time commitment, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and the choice of "opting out" at any point. Permission to audiotape interviews was requested of, and granted by, all participants. In addition, I gathered basic information such as class level, age, gender, national origin, fluency in other languages, and exposure to Deafness, to ensure selection of a variety of learner variables (See Appendix D).

Final selection of one or two individuals from each level was based primarily on perceived willingness to share their personal perceptions with me.

Within this parameter, however, I sought to choose as diverse a sample as possible. While subjects may not be representative in the quantitative sense, a more qualitative view asserts that "any subject belonging to a specified group is considered to represent that group. Anyone's experience, if well described, represents a 'slice from the life world' " (Sandelowski, 1986: 32).

Data Collection

Preliminary Steps

Prior to selecting subjects and beginning the interviews, I completed several preparatory steps:

1. Brief classroom observations at each level allowed me to gain some familiarity with classroom activities and interactions, and to thereby ensure better understanding of any references made by respondents during interviews.

2. I prepared a draft interview "guide" (Appendix C), which was revised after critical examination and recommendations by two experts in instruction and research. The guide was intended simply to provide direction for the interviews, thus ensuring that all research questions would be addressed.

3. A pilot study, with three former learners from the program, focused primarily on refining the interview guide and my own skills as an interviewer. During this phase, the interview format was monitored for possible ambiguity, bias and leading questions, and I made adjustments accordingly.

The Interviews

The primary mode of inquiry in this study was personal interviews. Although interviews are particularly difficult to replicate, they provide "the richest information per unit of time" (Guba & Lincoln, 1987: 187). I interviewed each subject two or three times, for approximately an hour each time, over the course of the winter term; Figure 2 provides further detail. I felt it was important that respondents be comfortable, relaxed, and free of distractions during interviews. So that issues of privacy, neutral ground and optimal time of day could be given foremost consideration, interview times and settings were decided primarily by interviewees, according to their comfort and convenience.

The interview format was semi-structured (Bailey, 1987), or semi-standardized (Berg, 1989). Predetermined general questions provided guidance, with flexibility for the informant to digress and the interviewer to probe further. According to Malcolm Knowles, "open-ended, non-directive interviews are more valuable than other kinds for getting at feelings and attitudes and at the causes of problems" (1980: 101). At each stage of the interviews, according to the subject's understanding and responses, I adapted or repeated questions to accommodate individual communication styles.

Interviews followed a similar format in each case:

1. During the initial round of interviews more time was allotted to building rapport with participants and attending to their concerns and questions. I began, as in subsequent interviews, with small talk largely unrelated to the

Figure 2
Interview Schedule: (January - April)

	Week #									
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Number of Interviews	3	1	2	1	4	0	0	2	5	1

study. After reiterating the purpose of the study and briefly outlining the plan for the session, I then commenced the interview. The first session addressed personal learning experiences, and this portion of the interview was audiotaped. For two subjects, one who discontinued the ASL class and another who was selected later in the term, this interview was combined with the second, and so addressed reactions to the program and suggestions for revision as well.

2. During the second interview, I used notes to paraphrase my understanding of the data provided during the first session. Time was given to subjects for clarification, elaboration and making additions. Data collected during the second interview focused more specifically on the ASL program and how it influenced the personal learning experience in each case. I asked learners to share their suggestions for any changes they felt would enhance their learning. Again, the data-gathering portion was audiotaped.

3. The final interview in each case began, as before, with verification of

data from the last meeting. The primary purpose of this session was to provide an informal opportunity to add final comments, and to discuss the accuracy of researcher interpretations and themes as well as the categorized suggestions for change that had been offered thus far by all participants. Each subject was encouraged to note additions, deletions, and comments, either verbally or in written form on the summary outlines provided. This session was not audiotaped; however, I often took notes and jotted down quotes during our discussion, and verified their accuracy with the respondent before leaving.

Analysis of Data

> In most qualitative studies, data collection and data analysis take place simultaneously. In other words, the inquirer does not wait until all the data are 'in' before he or she begins to interpret them (Ary, 1990: 449).

As data comes in, the qualitative investigator studies it, reflects, and develops "hunches" which may or may not be discarded later. Several common approaches to analysis are discussed below.

In analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Ary et al, 1990), data collection is guided by a specific focus or question. Data is reduced by coding or categorization in an attempt to develop a descriptive model or theory. Initial theories are continually modified during the course of study.

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) is less focused on a specific problem and thus more flexible. Generally on a larger scale, it is most often used with multiple site, participant

observation studies. Bogdan & Biklen offer Glaser's 1978 version of the constant comparative method: collect initial data; develop categories; collect diverse data to fit each category; describe categories; seek basic social processes and relationships in the data; and continue to sample, code, and write as analysis focuses on basic categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Although the process is outlined in sequence, in reality steps occur with considerable overlap.

Miles & Huberman (1984) offer a very systematic approach, viewing data analysis as a flow of three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification:

1. Data reduction simplifies, paraphrases, selects, or otherwise transforms the raw data into a more manageable form. This process, which often includes coding or summarizing, continues throughout the research study.

2. Data display, in the form of tables, charts, and descriptive figures, organizes the data into a systematic format that is less cumbersome than prose, and thus allows more effective viewing and analysis.

3. Conclusion drawing and verification comprise the last two vital activities of analysis. In drawing conclusions, the researcher may employ such techniques as counting, clustering commonalities, noting repeated patterns, and recognizing plausibility in the data. Once tentative conclusions are established, they may be confirmed through a variety of steps, including triangulation across data sources, checking out rival explanations, checking for

researcher effects, and requesting feedback directly from the informants.

This study addressed one broad question, with a small purposive sample of learners in the context of one program. Given the breadth of the question, however, there was sufficient flexibility to take the study in a variety of directions and to examine various aspects of the learner experience. Like most qualitative studies, design continued to evolve with the process:

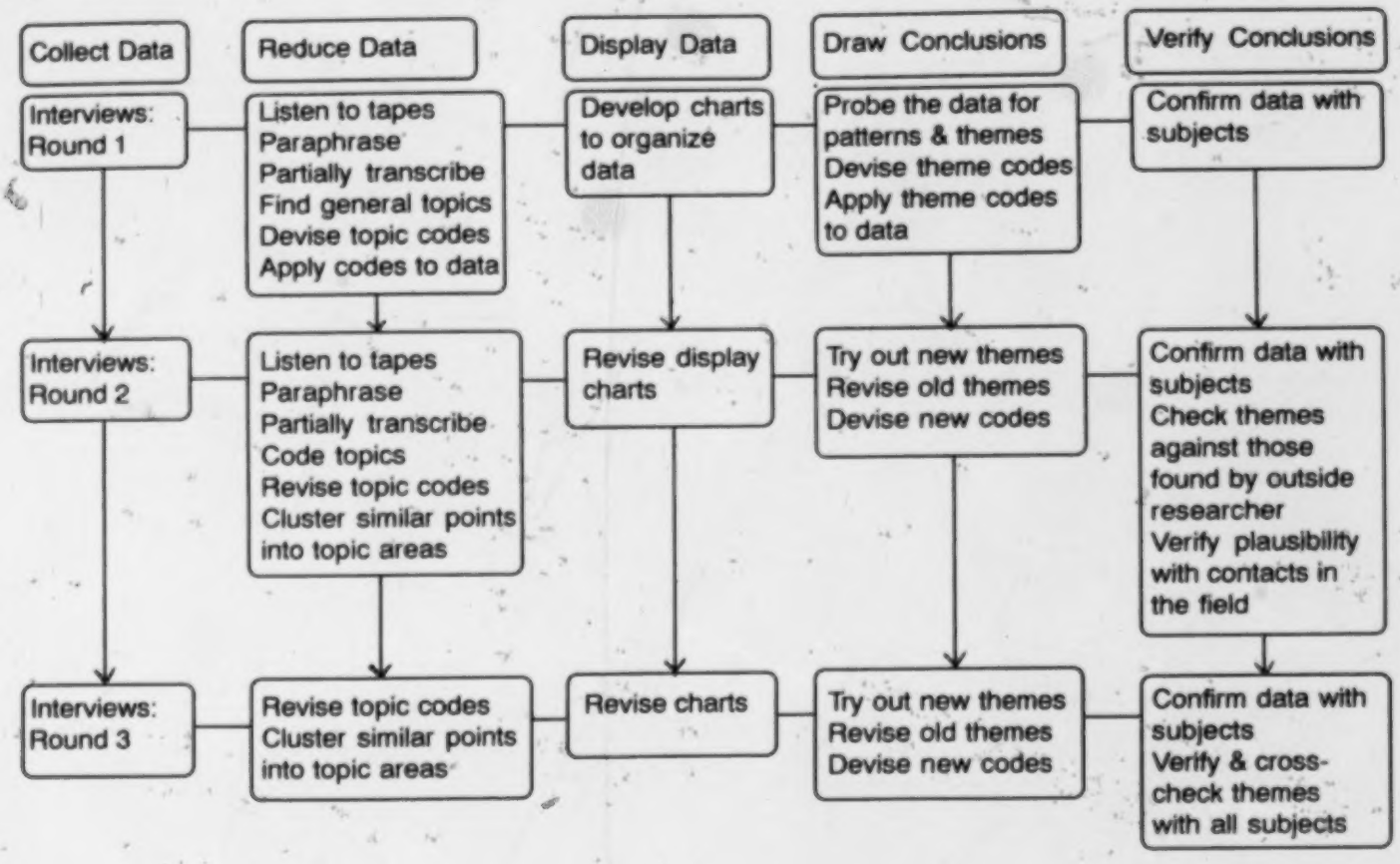
> Qualitative analysts do not often enjoy the operational advantages of their quantitative cousins in being able to predict their own analytic processes; consequently they cannot refine and order their raw data by operations built initially into the design of the research (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973: 108).

Rather than adhering to one particular method, I borrowed elements from known methods, used them as a basic guide, and adapted the approach as the process evolved. I found Miles & Huberman particularly useful in terms of a well organized, practical and manageable approach. Figure 3 illustrates the basic guide; although a sequential pattern is indicated, in reality considerable lateral overlap occurred.

The First Stage of Analysis

Since all data-gathering interviews were audiotaped, repeated listening, note-taking and paraphrasing became the first stage of my attempt to describe the phenomena and events expressed by learners. I found that listening to the tapes, rich with their diversity of vocal inflections, chuckles, pauses, and personal idiosyncrasies, allowed me to recapture the meaning more fully than the "flattened out" quality of the written word. Where I found that I needed to

Figure 3
Data Analysis



have the data in front of me for further study, I also transcribed relevant portions directly from the taped interviews. Often during analysis I listened as I read, using both the spoken and written versions simultaneously.

When I began the analytic process, I felt that descriptive topics, based loosely on my research questions, would be appropriate for data reduction. 'What are the learners talking about?' was the guiding question at this point. Name codes were not established prior to data collection, but were derived during analysis, as suggested by the initial data. Using naturally-occurring ideas as my units, I coded first into general topics, and later into specific points within each topic cluster. Coding began with the first interview and continued until all the interviews were completed. In order to avoid a backlog of raw data, I made an effort to code each interview before doing the next, although I often went back and revised as new topics emerged.

During my search for topics, I found that general themes were also becoming evident, and I began noting these as well. As new ideas, insights and questions came to mind, I regularly interrupted my work to jot down questions and memos. During these interim stages, I found the use of display charts to be helpful in providing me a clearer picture of the data already collected.

As I continued the process, I came to several realizations: the number of topics and themes was becoming decidedly unwieldy, and there was noticeable overlap developing between several topics, as well as between topics and

themes. At this point I felt more in-depth analysis was in order.

The Second Stage of Analysis

According to Miles & Huberman, "just naming or classifying what is out there is usually not enough. We need to understand the patterns, the recurrences, the *whys*." (italics theirs, 1984: 67)

As I began again to relisten to the tapes and look more deeply into the data, I adapted my questions of the data. From 'what are they talking about?' I moved into 'what are they saying about this?' What is the underlying feeling here? What does this tell me about the whole experience? And how does this fit with other data? In so doing, I found that some topics fit within larger topics, and that often several similar topics clustered into broader patterns or themes. As with the first stage, I often found it necessary to leave the data for short periods; tackling it again with a "fresh" eye usually turned up new insights. I continued the analysis over a period of time until I had contained all relevant data within six general descriptive patterns, or themes. A theme was designated as such only if it had been depicted in some form by all subjects. Once verified through a number of procedures (discussed in the next section) themes were written up in a descriptive, narrative format with illustrations drawn from the data, thus allowing the informants to tell their own story.

For the sake of easy access, all suggested changes to the program were extricated from the data and simply categorized according to topic. To make the suggestions more useful to the ASL program , I drew examples from the data to

complete the narrative presentation. Discussion of results and reflections on the related literature were addressed in a separate chapter.

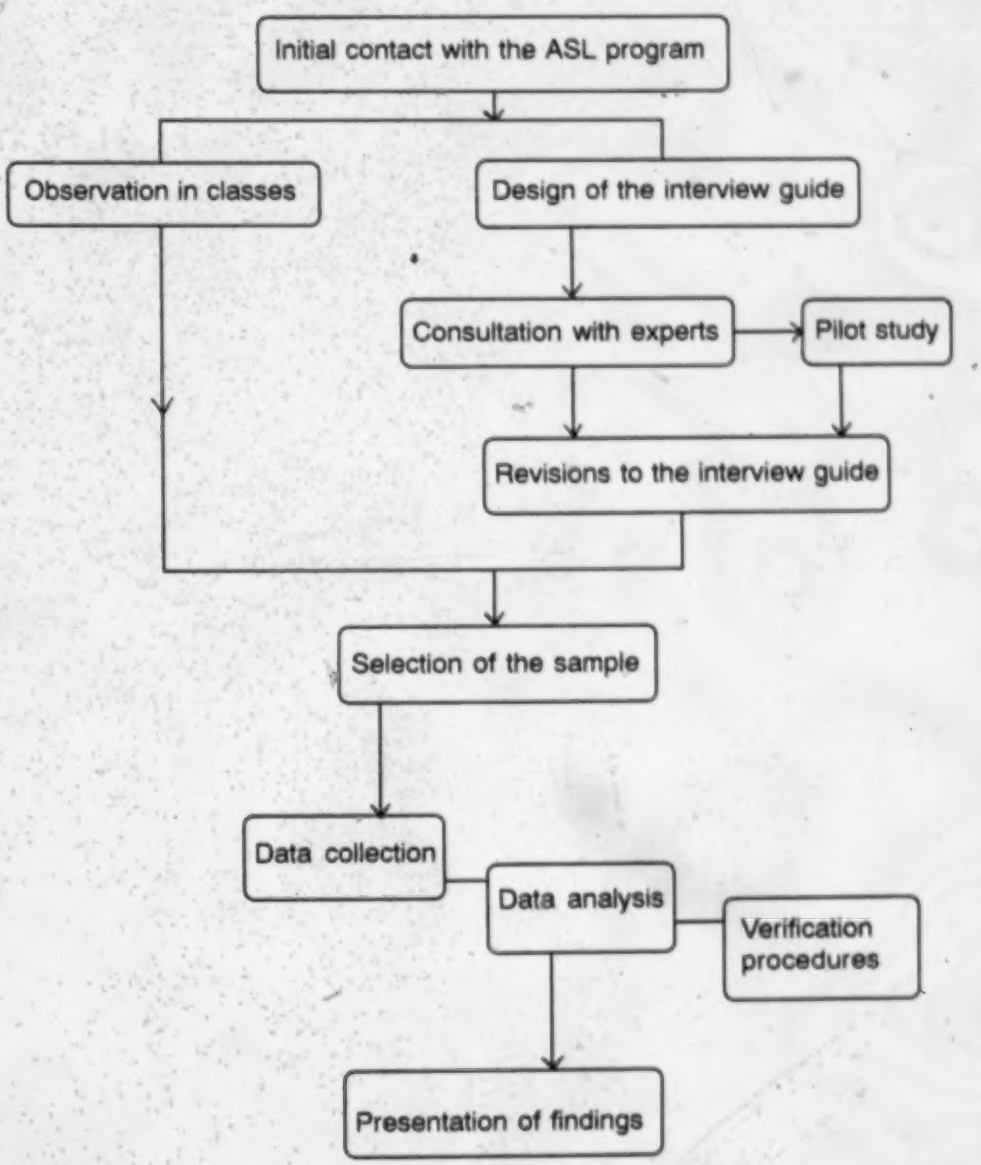
Verification procedures were used regularly during the research process, and are the focus of the next section. Figure 4 displays a complete outline summary of the methodology.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability refers to the replicability of findings, while validity refers to "the extent to which conclusions effectively represent empirical reality. . ."(LeCompte & Goetz, 1982: 32). Despite ongoing challenges by empirical researchers, steps can be taken to resolve these concerns in naturalistic study; several of these are discussed below.

Recognizing apparent differences between the scientific and naturalistic perceptions of these terms, qualitative investigators often use alternate but analagous referents. Reliability, otherwise termed "dependability" (Ary et al, 1990) and "auditability" (Guba & Lincoln,1981), may be viewed in qualitative studies as the fit between what data records show and what actually occurs in the field. Identical results from two studies are unlikely; "because human behavior is never static, no study can be replicated exactly. . ." (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982: 35). In this sense, two researchers could perform the same study with different data and findings, and both could be considered reliable. Since no two ethnographers work in precisely the same way, reliability may be

Figure 4
Methodology Capsulized



ensured with a detailed and logical "audit trail" of documented procedures, decisions, and rationale for choices along the way. If, when examined later by a third party, the experience is clearly understood, and the procedure deemed appropriate and properly executed, it will likely be considered reliable. For this reason, qualitative researchers typically keep a detailed journal and copious field notes to document ongoing assumptions, reflections, and decisions.

Validity, often termed in qualitative studies as "credibility" or "trustworthiness" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Ary et al, 1990), calls for a variety of procedures to confirm data, insights, and emerging theories. The most commonly used is triangulation, the use of multiple methods, data sources, and settings (Guba & Lincoln,1981; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Berg, 1989; Ary et al,1990). "Those ethnographies rich in primary data, which provide the reader with multiple examples from field notes, generally are considered the most credible" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982: 41). Repeated cross-checks with informants, either verbally or based on notes, will further confirm whether or not they concur with the researcher's account of findings. Mechanically recording data adds a measure of accuracy. Other procedures include independent observer analysis where feasible, and recognition of the "reality" of a phenomenon to those who personally experience it.

A number of measures were taken in this study to enhance validity and reliability:

1. A variety of learners served as data sources, representing all four

levels of ASL study, both genders, and a range of ages and backgrounds.

2. Interviews were audiotaped, to ensure accuracy of my recall of information and as a channel for double-checking when needed.

3. Regular checks with participants confirmed the accuracy of my understanding of data. This was done through verbal paraphrasing and clarifying questions during interviews, as well as by continual checking and verifying of ideas during subsequent interviews.

4. Individual learner realities were acknowledged.

5. As interpretations and themes emerged, I examined them against respondent perceptions, and cross-checked with other subjects.

6. Evidence was weighted somewhat differentially when I felt it to be appropriate. I agreed with Miles & Huberman that ". . . data from some informants are 'better'. The informant may be articulate, thoughtful, and reflective, and may enjoy talking about events and processes" (1984: 235). Where I felt this to be the case, the data was given more weight. For example, a student at a higher level may simply have more to offer in terms of experience with the ASL learning process at a variety of levels than is realistically possible for a beginning learner.

7. Extreme cases were noted. In particular, critical comments by learners who displayed reluctance in expressing negative opinions were taken seriously, since I felt the truth value to be high in such cases.

8. Plausibility of the data was regularly verified through discussion with

knowledgeable colleagues.

9. My themes were compared to those derived by a neutral researcher, in a triangulation procedure. "Triangulation", say Miles & Huberman, "is supposed to support a finding by showing that independent measures of it agree with it, or at least, don't contradict it" (1984: 234). Samples of data from six learners were subjected to independent analysis. Subsequent discussion with the other researcher revealed a close match of interpretations.

10. During the course of the study, I maintained a complete "audit trail." This included brief classroom observation notes, copies of letters sent, interview schedules, transcribed portions of taped interviews, and my own journal reflections.

Coping with Researcher Bias

In recognizing that qualitative research findings are inevitably value-bound, researcher bias is acknowledged as a reality that may influence results. The effects of such potential bias, however, can be minimized.

Experience with the Deaf community and culture, and fluency in American Sign Language afforded me the intuitive insights and personal interest requisite to a study such as this. My knowledge of the language, for instance, permitted immediate understanding of learner references to ASL signs, structures, and cultural idiosyncrasies. Despite my background, however, I had no professional connection with the ASL program. In that sense

I was very much an "outsider", with no connotations of authority that might inhibit free expression of ideas. Nor had I undergone a learning experience like that of my subjects. By stressing to them that I was the "learner" in this case, I hoped to remove any assumptions that I already knew the answers, and thereby to encourage them to express their views and perceptions more openly.

My involvement in the field as both interpreter and educator has created inevitable biases which must be noted. It is my belief, based on experience, that living with a second language is the best way to learn it. Interaction with the Deaf community, in this case, is the key to fully developed competency in ASL. Cultural learning, ideally in the guise of active acculturation, is vital to the development of fluent sign language. Feasibly, formal and informal learning can complement each other toward this end.

Since recognition of biases is prerequisite to reducing their impact, I also made an effort to mentally note my own feelings and reactions during interviews, and to document them regularly in my journal. In so doing, I was able to become more aware of my own values, reflect more critically upon my interview behaviors, and thus maintain a more neutral stance during interviews.

CHAPTER 4

The Experience of the Adult ASL Learner

The purpose of this study was to provide a clearer understanding of the adult experience of learning ASL. To this end, subjects were purposively selected on the basis of consistent study in the GMCC program, and ability and willingness to share their individual learning perceptions. From the list of suggested students who satisfied the above criteria, I chose a variety of learner variables, to yield as broad and complete a picture as possible with a small sample.

Within the final selection of seven learners, both genders were represented, with two males and five females. Although I had anticipated a more equal balance, women in the program clearly outnumbered the men; at the most advanced class level, there were no men at all. All levels of ASL study were included, with either one or two learners from each level. The age of subjects ranged from approximately twenty-five to fifty. Four learners were Canadian-born, while three moved here from elsewhere and had experienced cultures distinct from the Canadian way of life. Of the seven, two considered themselves fluent in languages other than English. Exposure to Deafness at the program entry level varied considerably, from no contact at all, to little contact, professional contact only, or frequent social contact. None of the subjects had Deaf members within the immediate family.

The study occurred during the 1991 Winter session of the ASL program, with the sample of learners drawn from the enrolled population at that time. Due to sample size and the use of a single ASL program setting, limited generalization is warranted. The study was intended as exploratory, descriptive analytic research that could form the foundation for larger scale subsequent studies, should quantifiable results be desired.

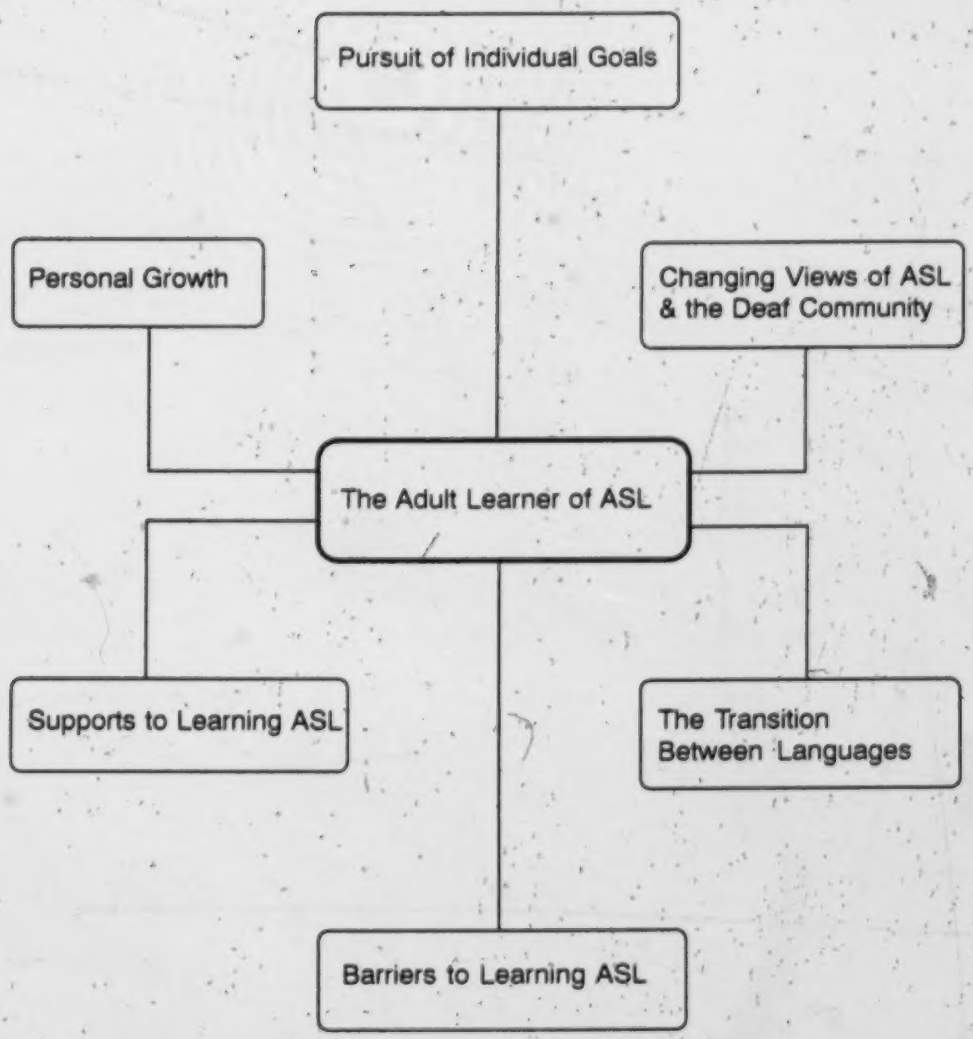
Data analysis revealed six major descriptive themes in the ASL learning experiences of seven adult learners, as displayed in Figure 5. Each pattern is described in this section, with illustrations from transcribed interview data. Tables 2 - 4 offer theme summaries in outline form.

Theme 1: Pursuit of Individual Goals

The adult learners in this study decided to undertake the study of ASL for a variety of reasons that reflected their own diversity. Recreation, intellectual challenge, and both general and specific career aspirations were among the objectives cited for entry into the program. Occasionally, entry goals broadened, developed further, or changed into something quite different once in the program. In each case, personal goals appeared to have considerable impact in shaping individual perceptions of the learning experience.

Ted, a young professional in Level 1, viewed taking ASL as "a great opportunity to do something completely different." While he did not anticipate a great deal of practical use for the language, he found appeal in the notion of

Figure 5
The Adult Learner of ASL: General Themes


Pursuit of Individual Goals
Personal Growth
Changing Views of ASL & the Deaf Community
The Adult Learner of ASL
Supports to Learning ASL
The Transition Between Languages
Barriers to Learning ASL

fresh mental stimulation: "It's something completely different than anything I've done. Just another activity that struck me as interesting - somewhat intellectual and a bit of a challenge." Ted did not intend this to be a long term endeavor; he "had no intention of going on to Level 2."

For Olivia, an older learner active in community work, entering the program seemed "a fun thing to do." "I was sort of in a hiatus period," she explained, "where I didn't know what I wanted to do, and looking for something to do." Learning ASL "was just this idea that came by. . . it was really by chance. It was nothing that was really aimed at anything."

Initially, Olivia thought learning ASL was "just a neat thing to do." "But the more I got into it," she continued, "the more I really enjoyed doing it." As she progressed through the classes, feeling that "it'd be really nice to help people," she began to consider other uses for her new skills, including volunteer work, and possibly even interpreting.

Gerry, a young man in his 30's, found himself in a social circle "becoming exposed more to the Deaf Community, to Deaf adults, social events, parties, dances. . . " A desire to fit into the group led ultimately to his decision to study ASL: ". . . I would be kinda stuck in the corner. They'd be signing away and I'd be the 'outcast' of the group. And, yeah, I felt left out. So - I wanted to be part of the group." Formal study offered a practical solution. In his words, "I figured, well, if I'm going to be around these people, I might as well learn how to communicate with them."

For Gerry, who had been away from academic life for many years, ASL study also offered an avenue to rejuvenate his education, "to get back into the learning atmosphere": ". . . I feel I wanna do something different. 'Better' myself. It's been a long time since I've been in school." He expressed some uncertainty about yet another possible pursuit: "I've thought about it - whether or not I'd like to become an interpreter, or . . . I don't know."

Although Paula was already involved in work with Deaf people that required the use of sign language, personal dissatisfaction with her skill level prompted this well-educated, serious learner to enter the program: "My skills were very much an English orientation. My goals initially were primarily vocabulary development. But as I got going in the courses, I felt that I really wanted to become fluent in ASL."

Pam, too, began ASL classes for practical reasons after she came into contact with Deaf people at work. Despite a subsequent job transition, she decided to continue the classes out of personal interest. She had formed friendships with Deaf individuals, and occasionally still worked with Deaf people. An outgoing young woman, Pam viewed herself in the same light as many of her ASL classmates who, she said, ". . . just want to be able to communicate with people who are Deaf, either for jobs or because they know people who are Deaf."

Robin, involved in University studies along with her ASL classes, had long aspired to a career that would ideally combine both pursuits: "That's the

area that I thought I'd like to work with - I had a great deal of empathy for people who can't see and can't hear because I think that there's so much in the world they're missing."

Her initial sense that "it would be an interesting area to work in" evolved further while she was in the program. In her words: ". . . now that I've started taking these courses, I'd like to finish and eventually do some (interpreting). I think that would be a good part-time sort of a job." Or, "it would be good to be able to use it in a counselling sort of a way. . . " To Robin, clearly a very caring individual, the possibilities were still expanding. "I think," she said, "that there's definitely more uses to American Sign Language than just being able to talk to someone who's Deaf."

Anita's learning motivation was focused from the outset and had not wavered during the several terms she had completed: "I want to go to the Interpreter Training Program. And of course in order to get into that I needed to know sign language. So that is what I did." When I spoke with this bubbly, energetic young woman, she was already planning the step beyond interpreting: "I have a long term goal. . . after I finish my interpreter training. . . . I would like to get a Special Education degree. So in that way I could be able to teach. . ." The desire to help people was a strong motivator for this learner. "You could do so much," she said with certainty, "you really <u>can</u> help. And that is something that (would) really fulfill me."

For each learner, the perceived relevancy of learning activities offered by

the program related directly to individual goals. Typically, the need to master basic communication was foremost. Anita, a Level 3 learner hoping to one day interpret, described her expectation of present classes: "I expected to see if I could communicate with a person who couldn't hear me - and if I really could make normal conversation."

In a similar vein, four learners at four different levels expressed their anticipation of upcoming conversational classes. Said a Level 1 learner: "I think (the conversational class) would be a good complement to this one. There's no exams or no assignments. There's no pressure that way - it's just basic communication." A Level 2 learner agreed that it would be "great," citing "no exams, no testing, I think it's just purely practice." The value of such a focus was echoed by a Level 3 learner who said, "if I could just pick what I was gonna take, I would just take (the conversational classes) all the way along. Unfortunately, you can't do that unless you take other ones first!" While this learner felt "the best learning would be if I was working with Deaf people a lot," she also felt she " would need the formal setting too - because that does clarify a lot of the grammatical structure."

A Level 4 learner, also looking forward to a conversational class, addressed the pluses of the anticipated experience: ". . . the exposure to a variety of guest speakers in a very informal kind of setting, without evaluaton. I guess that's how I learn best - where it's <u>real</u> communication. . . rather than 'practices'." Looking further ahead, she reiterated the appeal of using the

language in a personally meaningful way:

> The Level 5 course really interests me, in the way of being exposed to a lot of different Deaf adults, discussing a lot of different topics. . . a very informal kind of discussion, of different social issues or political issues that are relevant.

One learner who dropped out of the program early in the term spoke of his expectation for "real" interactive tools from the beginning, and his frustration with receptive exercises that weren't "anything I could really use." "I didn't want to look at things," he said, " I wanted to learn how to communicate!" He elaborated on his personal purpose for the course:

> The same as I would do if I went to France - I'd want to know enough language to 'get by' - the where's, the what's, how, questions, how to receive the answers, how to ask somebody to speak more slowly - that type of thing. That's what I was really hoping to get out of it.

While some learners saw program goals as reasonably consistent with their own, this learner was one of several who sensed a clear discrepancy between his pursuits and those of the program. He came to this realization shortly after entering his first class: ". . . I found out that if I was going to be successful in the program that 'getting by' wasn't going to be enough. I was going to have to pick up the rate." Acknowledging his quest for "a 'recreational' level" to balance his busy daytime career, he explained further:

> The level of concentration was really quite high in the class - you had to be 'turned on' all the time, in order to pick up everything that was offered. So - there were points when it wasn't 'fun' - it was 'work'. And I think I was looking for something that was a little more 'fun'."

Paula, a senior learner in the program, made a particularly salient

observation based on her perception of the program goal: "My opinion (is) that it has become sort of a pretest for the Interpreter Training Program, which I think is unfortunate because I see them fairly separate. . . " She went on:

> The four or five levels of ASL have somehow gotten really attached to the Interpreter Training Program. I think there is very much the expectation that people who take the ASL courses are people who are going to be entering the Interpreter Training Program. But there doesn't seem to be the recognition that there are, I think, a fair number of people who don't have an interest in making a career of becoming an interpreter, don't care to enter the Interpreter Training Program - that mastering the language is a goal in itself - it's not a stepping-stone towards a career.

She spoke of her surprise at the program format: "I had entered the program more for a personal interest. Hadn't really expected something along the lines, formality-wise, of a University credit course or a college credit course." As a further observation:

> . . . when I look at the formality of the assessment, and the certificates to go on, and a certain 70% criterion expected for moving on to the next level, I don't find that consistent with a general interest, non-credit course.

Paula continued, elaborating on what she referred to as "the undertone" of the program, and "the kind of information that goes around":

> . . . I get the feeling there is an interest in 'weeding out' people, because they would not be appropriate candidates for the Interpreter Training Program. And so these kinds of decisions are made at the Levels 3 and 4. And I find that quite offensive! Because those people will be weeded out in the (ITP) interview process and the entrance exam. I don't think it's relevant whether or not someone would make an appropriate interpreter candidate, at the Level 3 or 4 program.

She felt this "weeding out" interest to be at odds with another perceived goal of the program, that of "public education" about ASL and the Deaf community.

Pam, another learner who did not aspire to an interpreting career, expressed her sentiments bluntly:

> . . . it depends what your aim is. And I think for Grant MacEwan, their aim should be that if you go through the course, you'll learn a lot, and you'll pass it. Cuz let's face it, that's people's free time and their own money.

Theme 2: Changing Views of ASL & the Deaf Community

Respondents entered the ASL program with diverse notions of the target language and community - from no information, limited facts or some misconceptions, to a reasonable grasp of what was invplved. Common to all learners, however, was the apparent, if gradual, evolution of a more accurate and well-defined picture of ASL, Deaf people and their culture.

Ted spoke of his reaction to an encounter prior to program entry: "I had met a few Deaf people who use ASL and I just looked in awe, like somebody speaking Swahili." When he started his class, he had "zero" information, but realized even at the entry point that ASL was something "completely different."

Robin's limited information about ASL and the Deaf community came solely "through the media," which convinced her that "it was a separate culture and a separate language." Comparing ASL to English in her first level of ASL study, she felt "the sentence structure is a little bit different in ASL versus English. That's probably the biggest difference." ASL vocabulary she perceived as "pretty much the same as English." She noted another apparent difference between the languages: "They don't have the words to describe. . .

Table 2: Data Analysis
Themes 1 & 2 and Constituent Categories

Pursuit of Individual Goals	Changing Views of ASL & the Deaf Community
Personal learning motivation - interpreting career - recreational - intellectual stimulation - changing motivation Desire for meaningful learning related to goal Discrepancy between own goals & program goals	Perceptions of ASL - lack of initial information - misconceptions - recognition of "real" language Evolving impressions of the people - no information - curiosity - as handicapped/different - as regular people - diverse nature of the group Cultural learning - no information - basic distinctions - emotional responses

Table 3. Data Analysis
Themes 3 & 4 and Constituent Categories

The Transition Between Languages	Barriers to Learning ASL
Self-assessed achievement - interlanguage or pidgin stage - rigidity with language - knowing vs using rules - expressive-receptive gap Reactions to the transition - anxiety - frustration with own skills - acceptance The role of confidence - related to competency - reflected in interaction with Deaf people	Individual affective variables - fear of the unknown - fear of failure/withdrawal - expectations by self & others - getting motivated Time constraints New demands of a visual language Frustration with others - peers - instructors Lack of information or opportunity Inconsistency among classes "Rote" practice Testing format Uncertainty about program goals

Table 4: Data Analysis
Themes 5 & 6 and Constituent Categories

Supports to Learning ASL	Personal Growth
Instructional style - reinforcement/feedback - pacing of learning - modelling of ASL - safe environment - emphasis on communication - humor as a learning tool Immersion approach External learning experiences - other spoken languages - drama Peers - empathy - shared practice Exposure to a variety of Deaf signers Relevant activities Informal practice opportunities Regular feedback Mistakes as a learning tool Personal learning strategies - real Deaf interaction - regular practice - imitation - association - prediction	Seeing & understanding a different perspective Greater visual awareness New awareness of self Increase in confidence Pride in achievement Discovery of a passion for learning

they use facial expression, body language more." Robin saw this as a significant difference: "I think their descriptive words, the ones that they have, are probably more powerful than ours. Just because they do have the element of expression, a lot more than English."

Olivia, in the second level, commented on her initial view of ASL: "I didn't look at it as a language, I just looked at it as a 'means to an end', in the beginning." Since joining the program, she had begun to see it as a "very basic" language:

> . . . I think maybe it's a simplified language? There's not that much in terms of tenses. There's tenses, but it's not like feminine table - like French and German, where you have feminine nouns and masculine nouns and all that stuff. I think it's more of a simplified language.

She went on to note some of the unique features of ASL:

> Your facial expressions are so important, whereas in another language it doesn't matter if you've got a blank face - it doesn't make any difference. Also the way sentences are structured. It shows you how peripheral some of the words are in English - in any language.

Pam remembered her first impressions of ASL as minimal: "I knew ASL existed but I wasn't quite sure how different it is. And that's been quite a learning experience for me, just to see what a difference it is." Her understanding increased gradually over several levels:

> It wasn't really till Level 3 that I really started to appreciate the spatial, visual qualities of it. Before that it didn't work for me yet - I just translated English words into signs. And now I can see there's a lot of things in ASL that don't translate into written form - it's just different. That, I wasn't aware of at all when I started.

She began to understand the "huge difference between ASL and English. Far

more than there would be between Spanish and English." She noted as a crucial distinction that ". . . they really use the space, as though you're 'painting a picture'. And I hadn't appreciated that before. It hadn't made sense to me before. . . " She described further distinctions as ". . . the body language and the facial expression."

Pam noticed a strong emotional component to the language:

> You're really revealing more of yourself than you do in normal language - I think that's true. And you seem to be more in touch with the person. Which at first I found really threatening. And I really didn't like it.

She explained further:

> I still find I usually have a really strong reaction to someone who's signing to me - either I'm really comfortable with them or I'm really not comfortable. And there's hardly ever a middle ground for me. I'm not sure why that is, but I've noticed it.

Although she was unable to pinpoint the source of her feeling, she felt that "part of it is you feel more of a connection to (the signer)."

Gerry, who entered the program knowing that ASL was a distinct language, found that his understanding continued to expand. "In Level 1," he said, "I realized there was a big difference in structure." "But," he continued, " I didn't realize it was such a <u>great</u> difference in structure."

Due to some prior experience with Deaf people, Paula felt that she had come to her classes well prepared: "I think that that respect for ASL as a language in its own right was already there. . . " She too saw her understanding continue to evolve within the class setting.

Anita, entering the program with a virtual absence of background information, knew by "the first level, just starting" that "there was a different grammar, different structure - and so it was a different language! And it's a separate language like Spanish. . . " She quickly developed a keen sense of the visually expressive nature of ASL:

> I think (if) people that don't know any sign language, see a Deaf person signing - they will understand some, even though they don't understand anything about the language. And I think that is a wrong idea - that many people think, 'No, I won't understand!" And they block out and they are impatient - and (think) 'forget it'!

Anita touched on the emotional aspect of the language as well, saying " I see sign as a performance, as an art. The way that you express. . . is from inside of you." She spoke of her reaction to watching a song signed by an instructor: "Seeing them doing it, you feel the music! It's really neat! I really enjoy it."

Several learners expressed surprise at the pace of their learning, with observations such as:

> I didn't know that we'd be able to learn so much. Because I've taken other language courses. . . and you don't learn nearly as much, I don't feel."

> . . . you can learn it, this language - so quickly! I could make myself understood after three months. Most languages would take much longer.

> . . . going from fingerspelling and knowing a few words to actually 'speaking' in phrases. . . and that was a period of 2 1/2 hours. We had gone from 'nothing' to 'communication'.

Impressions of the Deaf community developed along with the language. Olivia, who felt she "didn't have any preconceptions" prior to program entry,

shared her first thoughts about the Deaf population:

> . . . I knew it was there, and it was a group of people. Basically, it was like an entity unto itself. I sort of categorize people like that, you know - I think that there are always groups of people, and they get along with each other, because they want to, or have to, for whatever reason there is.

In fact, she felt her only real awareness of a "Deaf group of people or community" had come "when this uprising happened at Gallaudet University." At the time, she remembered feeling some curiosity: "I wondered how they would 'uprise' - you know, if you can't speak!" She followed the event with interest, and found herself "really impressed with the fact that they stood up for their rights and did what they did. I thought it was just amazing." The curiosity resurfaced in Level 1, when she realized her instructor would be Deaf:

> . . . I sort of wondered how they were going to communicate with me, you know. How were they going to teach me a language, when they couldn't speak, you know? I couldn't sort of work that out - found that quite strange."

Olivia's perception of Deaf people as she progressed through Level 2 was that they are "more warm," and "more aware of people's feelings. . . " At the same time, she saw them as "isolated," and "on the outside looking in on the general community." "They are segregated," she continued, "by the fact that they're Deaf. It's not like you just have a language barrier - I think it's more than that."

She admitted that ". . . I still don't know anybody, except for the people that I've met at Grant MacEwan, that are Deaf." With limited contact, her knowledge of Deaf people remained minimal and her curiosity largely

unsatisfied. "I don't know," she mused, "if there's any Deaf lawyer, if there's a Deaf doctor - I think because going through University would be really difficult, to go through at that level." "Makes you wonder," she continued, "Why are they missing out on all this stuff? Is there something wrong with the system? Or don't they want to do it? Or are they afraid to do it?"

When Robin started Level 1 not long ago, she assumed "that the Deaf culture just kind of stayed to themselves. And didn't really interact with the hearing world." Once in her first class, she realized "that Deaf people can function just as well as anybody in the community."

Pam recalled her startled reaction upon realizing in Level 1 that her instructor would in fact be Deaf: "It was really frightening! And if I hadn't had another person with me. . . I probably would've left at that point, and said 'this is too scary. I can't possibly deal with it!' " Although her anxiety subsequently lessened, she felt at the time that "it seemed like such a huge task to learn sign language."

Later impressions were more positive. "Most Deaf people I've met," said Pam, "go out of their way to be really friendly and help you." "As a group, as a bunch," she continued, "I could say they have more patience than hearing people." Still, there were some surprises:

> I didn't expect to find as much of a division between hearing and Deaf people as there seems to be. . . .I find there's still a lot of 'us' and 'them' sort of mentality. And that surprised me. I didn't expect that.

First impressions by a Level 1 learner were similar, that Deaf people are

a "very tight" group. "If I had to describe it in a word," he explained, "I'd say they're 'insular' - they stick together."

Anita's view of the target population had evolved from a focus on the difference to a focus on the similarity:

> (Deafness is) a physical defect, like some people maybe don't have arms! The problem with the Deaf people is they can't hear. They are completely normal persons that are people, like anybody! And that is one thing that I have changed (in my understanding) since the beginning - to now.

With her understanding came an altered attitude as well: "I didn't understand a lot of things. I said, 'Oh yeah. . . a pity that they don't hear. But it's not that! It's not really a big impairment. . . "

Gerry, regularly exposed to Deaf people outside the classroom setting, saw the population in a variable light:

> Their characteristics are very similar, I find. . . . Very down-to-earth, happy go-lucky - they're happy people. But I also find them very short, very quick-tempered. They can 'turn' (snaps fingers) just like that.

He also sensed that the program instructors were not necessarily representative of the entire community, noticing:

> . . . the differences between the teachers - the ASL teachers I know - and the Deaf community outside the college. I find a lot of them can be patient with you, if they realize that you're trying to learn their language, you know. You're trying. . . you're doing your best. But I've also come across some that just couldn't be bothered. Very frustrating, sometimes. Where they'll get short-tempered and just cut you off.

Cultural learning evolved gradually and steadily for all the learners as well. Initial conceptions were vague. Anita "didn't know anything about the

culture." From the media, Robin had known only that "it was a separate culture." For Olivia, "the biggest (learning) is that it's actually a culture!" Commented Pam, in Level 3: "I didn't think of it as being . . . enough to bond into a 'culture'. Now I can understand it a lot better."

Despite a growing comfort with the Deaf community, Gerry felt that by Level 2 he still lacked a clear conception of Deaf culture:

> I don't think I know enough about the Deaf culture really, yet, to say 'well, there's a difference here and a difference there', to pinpoint the differences. I haven't been involved within the Deaf culture enough. I'm still seeing it from the outside.

Other learners felt they could make some distinctions between hearing and Deaf culture. For Olivia, "(Deaf people) have a different way of lots of things." Besides the different language, Robin noted the "different way of adapting to their environment." Basic social etiquette and behavioral norms were becoming clearer, and cultural technology more familiar. Anita stressed the importance of learning cultural social skills early: "There's little things - you will make a mistake if you don't know. And you will be really embarrassed about it."

Several upper level learners found themselves reacting emotionally to their learning of cultural values. "It's a really strict culture. . . " said Anita," to be accepted is not easy." "To understand the culture," she felt, "you have to have an open mind - you have to accept it. . . " Occasionally, after learning about Deaf values, she found herself wondering "is a hearing person 'okay'?" Paula

wondered the same thing:

> . . . sometimes I find in some of the cultural information that's presented - almost a 'revenge' kind of quality at times there. There is sometimes a real 'bitterness', I think, towards hearing people. And maybe that's part of the culture, maybe it's not - I don't have a good grasp of that. But. . . a real distrust at times. And sometimes that comes across as attacks on hearing people. Rather than maybe just a presentation of the values of the Deaf culture. . .

Despite varied levels of cultural understanding, there was general agreement that the cultural component was an important and necessary part of learning the language.

Theme 3: The Transition Between Languages

Whether at Level 1 or Level 4, all the learners saw themselves at some point along the journey toward competency in the target language, and all shared some common experiences in the transition.

Often the interlanguage or pidgin stage was marked by interference from already-mastered languages. This was particularly evident with Anita, who found she was mastering the vocabulary well before the grammar and syntax. Already fluent in two spoken languages, she had this to say about her ASL development: "In expression, I think I need a lot more practice in that - because I still have a lot of English structure in my head. So I am not using a lot of ASL structure." Paula agreed that "vocabulary develops fairly quickly as compared with . . . grammatical knowledge."

Pam assessed her ability in a similar way: "For me to use ASL structure,

I'd have to think of what I wanted to say and then change it. Instead of think and sign at the same time." Given Pam's objective for the course, the prospect of remaining a "pidgin" signer was not disturbing. "I don't know if I will become fluent in ASL," she predicted, "I'll probably become a fluent 'signer', but I don't know if it'll be ASL."

Several learners noted their own rigidity with the new language. In some cases this emerged as difficulty understanding "new" Deaf people, as it did with Olivia. "I'm having trouble reading the instructor at this level," she said, "and it's obviously my problem." For Pam, it was Deaf people outside the program that posed the greatest obstacle: "In the classes I understand really well. But if I'm meeting a new Deaf person, I usually don't get any of it - it goes right over my head." She was uncertain why:

> I'm not sure if it's me - if I kind of tense up - 'I have to understand this person!' I don't know if it's that, or if it's just that they're not used to dealing with hearing people so they don't modify what they do.

Paula, who had minimal opportunity to interact with Deaf adults outside the program context, felt her ability to generalize the learning was slow in developing. Referring to language reception, she explained:

> I'm not recognizing a more 'relaxed' style of signing. I sometimes don't recognize the sign. For me, at one point, (the sign) 'student' had to come up to here, just about, and down to here. But something smaller I wasn't recognizing as the same sign.

Receptive fingerspelling was another stumbling block for most learners. Seeing the parts rather than the whole was an acknowledged weakness for

Robin, who said "when someone gives me the letters in fingerspelling. . . I think, for example 's-a-d' - I will think 's-a-d' instead of 'sad' - that sort of thing." Pam agreed. "I have a real problem with receptive fingerspelling," she explained, "because I can understand the letters, but I can't put them into a word to save my life, unless I write them." She elaborated on her progress:

> (A friend) was right when she said 'look at the shape and not the letters', but I can't do that very easily yet. Actually I don't think I have control yet. Sometimes I slip into that . . . as soon as you become aware you're doing it, you lose it.

Paula, reflecting further on her own development, equated her initial rigidity to the requisite concentration on so many aspects of the new language. As she mastered certain aspects, she noticed that her flexibility with others increased:

> . . . in previous courses, I had a lot of difficulty with stringing constructions together. And using the facial expressions - that was always the criticism, that there wasn't enough facial expression. And I found that, as I got a better control of the vocabulary, that I didn't have to devote so much energy to finding the right sign, and there was energy left then, for focusing on meaning and how to say it. And I'm seeing that that's even more true now, once the grammar is beginning to come under better control. That, as the use of language becomes more and more spontaneous, I can devote energy to the subtleties, exactly how it's going to be said, rather than just what is going to be said and the vocabulary and the grammar for doing it.

For learners at all levels, natural and automatic use of the target language remained a conscious struggle. Simply knowing the language rules did not translate into fluent expressive use. In the words of a Level 4 learner who cited "spontaneous control over the language" as a "continuing weakness,"

"(in ASL). . . I'm thinking really carefully not only about what I want to say, but how I want to say it, and I don't have the brain power to do both fluently yet." "With rehearsal time and the chance to plan what I want to say," she continued, "I come up with, I think, fairly reasonable ASL structure. . . . But I can't right now use them spontaneously." While indicating satisfaction with her progress ," this learner felt she still had "a long way to go."

"When I'm thinking about it," said a Level 3 learner, "yeah, I try to (use ASL structure). But usually when you do a conversation, you are not thinking every word that you are going to say." A Level 2 learner agreed: "I tend to think, and then do the word, and think and then do the word, instead of just letting it be fluent." That this conscious process took time was a further frustration. "I can't think fast enough," "I need speed" and "my speed isn't up to 'normal' speed" were typical comments.

For Robin, as a beginner, the required use of facial and body language felt awkward. Paula, at a more advanced level, felt a greater degree of mastery despite earlier difficulties: "Something that surprised me that has developed, because it had been a weakness, is my facial expression. That was always something that was very difficult for me, and I find myself using it much more naturally." For Paula, persistence produced results.

All respondents in the study acknowledged a gap between language expression and reception, although there were clear discrepancies about which was deemed "better." Of the group, four assessed their expressive skills as

superior to their receptive; all four were at either Level 1 or 2. "In general," commented a beginning level learner, "I was better at performing it than I was at receiving it." Another at the same level agreed, explaining "I think I could probably 'speak' to another person but I may not be able to 'hear' them as well - they have to go really slow!"

A second level learner who felt her "expressive skills are better," acknowledged that she received little feedback from Deaf adults on the clarity of her ASL expression. She explained: "I'm understood, I think. Again, the only people I've communicated with are instructors." Another Level 2 learner, who interacted more regularly with the wider Deaf community, made this comment: "My expressive, I have no problem with. The receptive, if it's signed slow enough and three or four times slowly, I'll get it. But that's what's really frustrating me now - is the receptive."

At the two senior levels, respondents assessed language reception as the better developed skill. Said one: "I can recognize the sign much easier than I can recall it if I want to use it," adding "I think the gap has grown wider with every level I've done." Another limited her assessment to the reality of her target population contact. "On the basis of the instructor," she said, "I understand a lot." "Reading the fingerspelling," she admitted, was still "the hardest."

Another senior learner remarked that the direction of her expressive-receptive skill gap had shown "a reversal over the past little while":

When I first entered the program I would've said my expressive skills

> were stronger than my receptive skills. Now I'm not finding that to be the case. I'm finding it to be starting to parallel my strengths and weaknesses in my own language, and that is greater strength in the receptive than the expressive. I don't think well on my feet in English and I don't think well on my feet in ASL! That pattern is starting to emerge.

She ventured an explanation for this shifting trend: ". . . before, my expressive skills were the stronger because I was the one that controlled the level of the conversation and the pace of the conversation. Rather than receptively, (you take) whatever you're dealt. . , !"

For many, the language learning process was marked with fluctuations, both academically and emotionally. Laughed one respondent ruefully, commenting on the process, "It's up and down. The 'success' can be over in the 'failure' column next week!"

Anxiety was a common reaction to the formative stages of the transition: "I went into every class sort of feeling a little nervous about, okay, 'what are we gonna do?' " said a beginning level student, "And 'did I do everything that I was supposed to do for this week?' "

Another beginner speculated on the source of the feeling:

> (The anxiety comes) probably from not knowing enough about the language. And not knowing which words I don't know. . . . For example, if it's going really fast - not being able to say, 'I don't understand that word! Not being able to communicate and say, 'I got this and this word, but I didn't get that word. . .

Lack of competency was clearly the issue for this new learner: ". . . I must admit, for the first couple of classes, I was afraid to ask questions because I didn't know how to ask them!"

A Level 2 learner agreed:

> That's where the frustration starts building up. If you don't understand it , first of all you don't know enough of the language to ask how. . . to ask your questions properly, to get my meaning across to the instructor. And then for (the instructor) to answer it - it's impossible! Well, not impossible - but it takes us longer than it should!

Anxiety diminished as language competency developed. An upper level student recalled her experience in Levels 1 and 2 as considerably more tense than in later stages. ". . . most of the time I was in class," she said of the early stages, "it was 'panic-city'! 'What are they saying?' "

Several learners saw the emotional upheavals as inevitable in a second language immersion setting. Pam, reflecting back on her Level 1 experience, made this apparent: "I don't think there's any way around that totally confused state - if you're gonna have a Deaf instructor, I don't think you can get around it." In retrospect, she felt "(the confusion) made us aware how big the task (of learning ASL) was." With a couple levels still ahead, Gerry agreed. "It's had its frustrations - but that's par for the course. I mean, learning a second language, especially at my age," he chuckled, "- it's tough!"

Confidence was identified by several respondents as a potential accelerating influence in the transition to competency. Progress in turn enhanced confidence, in a cyclical process. Simply surviving classroom activities increased the confidence of one learner. She spoke of her reaction to signing in front of classmates: "At first, it was a little unnerving. But then, once the class progressed, it just. . . .I wasn't as nervous about it."

Robin agreed that regular practice and increased competency lightened the stress load. "Knowing the material. . . ," she said, "that's another thing - if you feel really comfortable about the material it's probably a little easier then." Anita credited success in an earlier class for her gain in confidence:

> When I started I felt a little bit nervous. I thought, 'Oh, I don't know if I will be able to really understand it, and do it. But then in the class, at that time, I felt I was one of the 'good' people - like one that could get a lot from it. Some students that were with me had a lot of trouble. . .

"For me," she continued, "it wasn't that hard. But then, that helped me of course to get confidence too. Because - yeah, I <u>really</u> am understanding. And I'm <u>really</u> learning what I'm supposed to learn." The reverse was true for Olivia, who felt a lack of success was diminishing her confidence. ". . . I feel that I'm not doing as well," she remarked, " - so of course, you become more intense and concerned, if you don't feel you're doing as well." In her view, reduced confidence in turn had a decelerating effect on her learning.

For Gerry, "getting out and using it, and going to as many functions, and interacting with the Deaf as much as you can" were crucial to the growth of confidence. He explained his own experience:

> . . . if you don't use it, you'll lose it. You just gotta go out and use it. Which I don't do. I think that's why I feel so uncomfortable sometimes, and my confidence isn't up. Because I haven't practiced, haven't used it.

For a learner at the third level, new confidence had removed inhibitions. She remarked on the shift:

> It's not that I'm comfortable because my conversational skills are good -

it's just that I feel comfortable now saying 'I don't get it'. Or fingerspelling, or whatever. I don't feel inhibited about that now. And before, I did.

Confidence levels were reflected in learner reactions to communication with adult Deaf signers. Gerry said it this way: "The (ASL) teachers know where you're at with the language. They understand what it's like to be learning the language, and what we're feeling. What we're going through, trying to be in this conversation." With other Deaf people, he admitted to feeling "nervous" and "not totally at ease." "Deaf adults I don't know," he explained further, "I tend more to shy away. And let the experienced signers have the conversation."

Theme 4: Barriers to Learning ASL

Inevitably, all seven adult learners encountered hurdles that threatened their success in learning ASL. Some obstacles were anticipated; others were came as a surprise. Some were common to any learning experience; others emphasized the exceptionality of visual language learning.

Individual affective reactions posed the most cumbersome obstacle, according to a majority of study participants. At the entry level in particular, fear of the unknown was an inhibitor. Recalling her first level, Pam saw the new and unfamiliar challenge of relating to a Deaf instructor as the root of her fear. "You knew you had absolutely no hope of communicating with that person," she said, "unless you knew some signs." Robin chuckled as she remembered a similar reaction: "I was scared! I thought, how am I gonna talk to this Deaf teacher! I mean, I can't, I can't. . . what am I gonna say? How can I talk to him?"

While Pam felt her comfort level had risen within the class setting, she still suffered from nerves when she attended Deaf socials. It went beyond coping with new social settings:

> . . . the fact that they're Deaf and I need to use sign language just adds more stress to that. Besides not thinking of anything to say, then you have to also think, 'okay, can I sign whatever it is I want to say?'

Robin described a parallel reaction before a Level 1 social experience :

> Well, to be very honest, I was very nervous about going (out socially in a mixed group) at first, because, like I said, I never really talked to a Deaf person. And I was thinking, 'Oh , well, how am I gonna talk to him?'

For Paula, "performance" anxiety was very real. She spoke of her discomfort with the presentation style of homework assignments:

> . . . it was standing up in front of the class - I think that those (activities) were difficult - probably for a lot of people, because we were struggling with the fluency issue, grammar, vocabulary, facial expression, what to say, how to say it - there was a real load. Plus the pressure of having to stand up in front of a group of peers - I think that made an already difficult situation more difficult.

In a similar vein, Olivia found signing to her instructor to be the stressor. She explained: "If I'm doing it to the instructor, I get really uptight and then I usually get worse, because then you get all tense, and you forget things. I get pretty uptight." Where did it come from? For Olivia the answer was simple: "Basically, I don't want to make a fool of myself, and I think that's the big thing."

Concern about "lack of receptive skills" prompted Gerry's anxiety. He clarified his feeling:

> I've been told and told and told, 'If you miss a sign, don't worry about it, just forget it, go on'. But I find myself 'Oh my God, what was that sign!'

> And by the time I remember what that sign was, I've missed ten more signs. And then you get totally frustrated.

Olivia's reaction was the same: "If I miss a word, I panic. Which is the worst thing you can do - because then you miss the rest of the sentence."

For several respondents, fear of failure was the deterrent to learning. "You just feel stupid," Gerry offered, "it's just like back in elementary school. You didn't wanna look so stupid!" Olivia noticed the impact of this concern during test situations. ". . . you wouldn't volunteer anything that was slightly out of the ordinary," she explained, " you would rather go the simple route."

Sometimes fear of failure emerged in the guise of withdrawal from the situation. For Gerry, this was one way of coping: ". . . I found myself shutting it out because I just don't want to have to deal with that frustration." Pam knew the feeling: "A lot of times I would . . . feel really bored. It wasn't that it was too easy and I didn't have anything to think about - it's just thinking that something's really hard, you just shut off."

Self-imposed expectations and perceived expectations by Deaf contacts created further obstacles for some learners. This was true of Anita, who felt she should be doing better: "Sometimes when. . . I think I have done something well, and in fact I didn't, so that of course frustrates me a little bit." Gerry, too, had high standards for himself and became frustrated when he did not meet them. He felt his limited competency affected not only him but Deaf associates as well. He put it this way: "It really stifles the conversation, when you're

continually having to ask someone to repeat. It's frustrating for me, and I'm sure it's frustrating for the Deaf adult." He went on: "The more I learn, the longer I go through the program, the more uncomfortable I get with some people." Asked why, he replied, "I feel like now there's more expected of me."

Simply getting motivated to put in the effort warranted by second language learning was difficult for most learners. Procrastination was a real learning block. Anita berated herself for this: ". . . I don't practice enough - I should! I don't have the . . . interaction with the Deaf community. So that of course doesn't help."

"I'm just not pushing myself the way I should be," admitted Gerry, "It's too easy to come home, sit on the couch, and turn the TV on." Similarly, Olivia offered no excuses and faulted no one but herself for the lack of drive. "I'm not practicing enough," she said, "and I think that's my fault." "My problem," she continued, "is that I don't know anybody else to practice with - and I haven't done anything about it." Other opportunities had been passed up: "I haven't, sort of, made the extra effort to go (to Deaf functions)." Hiring a tutor had been considered, but Olivia felt "sort of embarrassed to do it."

For Paula, a readily acknowledged obstacle was her "lack of studying, both in terms of time as well as willingness to put in the energy to do that." She went on to clarify why she chose not to attend the Deaf community socials which would provide "some really nice informal opportunities to be signing": ". . . I tend not to go out and seek the company of Deaf adults in social settings, to then be

able to practice my ASL with a mature language user. I'm not a party person - any kind of party! I don't do parties of any sort."

Time constraints were an unavoidable fact of life for adult learners immersed in daily work, school, and family pursuits. Often practice endeavors suffered as a result. Several participants made this reality apparent, with comments such as: "I didn't know, if I took (a resource) home, if I'd have the time to use it. . . ," "It's just hard to fit it in. . . ," and "I just never have thought I'd have the time to do it." ". . . if I had the time," said another, "I could go and volunteer at the Deaf school. I mean, it's up to me." For a learner who discontinued the program during the term, scheduling conflicts were acknowledged as one major factor in the decision.

The new demands of learning a visual language offered challenges to participants at every level. One learner laughingly described the task: "It's a visual language. It's not from your head to your mouth - it's from your head to your hands - and maybe that takes a little longer, I don't know!"

Becoming a visual learner was difficult for a Level 3 respondent who relied primarily on the auditory sense. She found herself floundering when denied access to the listening and writing channels:

> The best way for me to learn is to write whatever I'm doing and hear it at the same time. You don't use either one of those skills when you're learning ASL. So that was a huge transition for me.

"Part of why I was so tense," she felt, "(was) because I don't remember things if I just see them."

A Level 2 learner encountered problems with the grammatical features of ASL. "I wasn't expecting the structure to be so different than the English structure," he explained, ". . . having a little difficulty with the structure." On a related note, a fourth level student struggled with the use of space in ASL. She clarified: "There've been a few concepts that I've had particular difficulty with - but I have that trouble just spatially anyway."

For a Level 1 learner, "getting used to being more creative in facial expression" was the stumbling block. She saw the skill as foreign to most hearing people: ". . . the expressions, facial expressions, body language . . . that's not really developed in the hearing world. I think that's probably the biggest barrier and the hardest to overcome." A third level scholar expressed a similar sentiment, noting her own inhibitions: "I'm not used to using body language and facial expression, and wasn't prepared to do that . . . I didn't realize that was such a vital part of it." Gerry felt there were predetermined limits to what could be developed: "I think, with facial expression, I think it's one of those things that you either have it or you don't. I really don't think you can develop <u>great</u> facial expression, to the extent that is expected in the language."

Occasionally both class peers and instructors became a source of frustration for learners. Through no fault of their own, the inevitable incompetency of classmates was sometimes an issue in small group practice sessions. Pam clarified the problem from her stance:

. . . most of the time you're with someone who knows as little as you do.

> And sort of muddling through, but you're not sure . . . what you know yourself really well, and you're not sure what the other person knows. And what's incorrect.

Paula agreed that she was "not finding that some of the practice activities with peers are really helpful." She explained why: "I get the most out of signing with someone else who is a better signer than me. And that I think advances my skills the most." For Ted, "it was hard working with a variety of levels in the class."

Peer attitude was part of the issue. Ted saw "the levels of motivation" in his class as diverse. "Some of the others," he felt, "didn' t seem like they really wanted to be there." For Ted, this had a detrimental effect on peer practice sessions, since "some people were fully prepared - and others weren't." As a learner who approached his task with dedication, he also became annoyed when basic class guidelines were abused by others: "They were talking back and forth and I had understood that the basic tenet of the program was that nobody talks in the room . . . that, I found frustrating." "I think it's rude, " was Olivia's comment.

Another learner noticed that classmates were sometimes quick to criticize: "You might get heck from a student about something, or corrected on a sign, but the instructors tend to very much cue into meaning rather than form." Other peer reactions were assumed. "I think you're being judged by your peers," was Olivia's feeling, "You're feeling that . . . you don't want to screw up."

Frustrations with instructors centred on individual rigidity and class

pacing. "It's the picky little things. . . , " Gerry explained. One of his concerns was the rigor of expectations for putting visual signs into written form. "To write it - that's where I'm running into difficulty. We're being asked to write (ASL). . . " Pam, recalling a similar experience in a previous level, expressed her thoughts more vehemently:

> . . . (Instructor) was looking for you to write down exactly what (Instructor) had signed. And most of us don't think that way, not in (a lower level), ever. If you understand the signs, you immediately convert it to what makes sense in English. And that was usually marked wrong - and I think that's a mistake!

She illustrated her meaning:

> If you said, like 'car-red-there'. . . in (that level), for sure, I would write 'that car is red'. Which isn't what (Instructor) signed, but it's certainly what the meaning was. So instead of looking for a meaning, (Instructor) was just looking for exact word-for-word.

Instructor pacing was an issue for some. Olivia described one disheartening experience that had an impact on her learning: "I didn't understand anything that was going on. (Instructor) was going through the vocabulary so quickly that I couldn't follow." She continued: ". . . if you want to make a note, by the time you start writing it down, you've missed the next three words! Because (Instructor)'s going so quickly." Neither was Gerry happy about the fluctuating pace of one class. He described it this way: "It seems we'll go for a couple weeks in a real lull - we're not doing much. Then all of a sudden, everything's - pow, all at once!"

Information overload was another concern. Gerry gave an example:

> . . . one teacher would - if we were going through vocabulary - I find it confusing at times because (Instructor)'d be throwing all kinds of nuances, like, 'well, you can do it this way, but this person might do it this way', and then, 'this doesn't really mean this word', and just throwing all kinds of things at us - for one word. I think. . . that's overload, at this point.

For at least two participants, lack of either information or opportunity presented a problem. In Anita's case it was the latter: "Now, I feel like I need more practice - personal practice. Well, being a full-time student doesn't help a lot either . . . and not knowing people from the Deaf community." She felt she was thereby limited in her quest to develop her new language.

Information about resources was Olivia's need. "I didn't know about tutors," she said, "until I had a major problem. And then somebody mentioned, 'well, you can get tutors'." No longer a beginner, she still felt uncertain about the best way to access practice opportunities, commenting, "I think I'd like to mingle more with the Deaf community but I don't know how one goes about that." She had questions: ". . . where do you make the effort, where do you start? You know - perhaps if I knew that there was somebody in the area. . . "

More than half the respondents mentioned some inconsistency between class levels that prevented a smooth flow from one to the next. One learner bemoaned the rocky transition from the first level to the second: "Level 1 - I was enjoying it. I felt like I was learning. Level 2 - the frustration thing . . . I don't know if it's my attitude, or the change in teachers." Another learner spoke of the leap between the first two levels this way: ". . . Level 1 is really geared to be more fun. And then Level 2 seemed like, 'okay, this is heavy duty work time.

That's how it felt to me." The same learner continued: "Level 3 - it really seemed to be, like, two steps above instead of one step above (Level 2). That may be corrected. I know they changed it. . ." She elaborated further: "Level 3 was really frustrating because I knew my vocabulary was shooting sky high and I felt far more confident communicating with Deaf people. But my marks just went down to the bottom." Another participant agreed that Level 3 "was a lot harder. . ."

One lower level student questioned divergent approaches in classes at the same level, particularly related to testing format. She wondered,". . . why are they getting it that way, and why are we getting it . . . . Should be standardized, perhaps?" Another student expressed confusion at getting a variety of answers about sign choices from different instructors.

Learning activities without real meaning or clear objectives were seen in a negative light by a number of respondents. In Gerry's words, ". . . the little 'exercises' don't seem to have any meaning - to me! Maybe they do - maybe I'll realize this later on. But now they don't." Looking back to an earlier level, he felt the "little games" were not particularly worthwhile, commenting, "I can see how (they) had a certain point - but I thought it was pretty elementary. My thoughts were on 'come on, let's get on with this, let's learn something here!' "

For Pam, rote dialogue drills posed undue frustration. She described her feeling:

Using the dialogues in the book and the situations in the book is really

> difficult because first of all you have to remember what it is that you're supposed to be saying and then try and match the signs and the facial expression. It's really a difficult way of doing it.

Continuing, she said, "I find it really difficult in class to just 'turn on' an expression, like anger or frustration or happiness, because I don't feel it."

Paula was equally candid with her opinion: "I call them 'dummy runs', where it's not real communication - it's just practice exercises. And so I learn best when it really, really is interpersonal communication." That the conversation have a clear purpose was essential to this learner: "By just signing sentences from the book . . . there really isn't a relationship that is being held together by that communication - it's not a meaningful communication."

Student assessment procedures drew strong comments from a majority of the participants. One Level 3 learner put it succinctly and simply: "In general I hate tests - I really hate tests. If I had classes with no tests, that would be great." "But on the other hand," came the quick afterthought, "there should be some way of measuring - how we are doing." A Level 4 learner took issue with the general attitude toward testing: "I don't like the seriousness with which evaluation occurs." From a Level 3 learner: "I really don't like their grading system."

Marking criteria was questioned. Pam was one who expressed uncertainty: "It just seems totally unpredictable what's going to be acceptable." As an example, she questioned the emphasis on details rather than the general meaning of ASL test stories. She described her perception of the process:

> . . . when I'm looking at the story - fine, I can sort of get the gist of the story. But then if you ask me tiny little comprehension details, like 'how much gas did they buy?' I don't remember that! It's not that I didn't see it when it happened, it's just. . . if I don't know that's coming up - I don't need to know that!

In Pam's view, "the problem with the test was that they were testing my remembering. . . instead of my comprehension of the signs." She commented on the irony: "Sometimes I could miss the whole point of the story, and still get the answers right!" In Gerry's experience, the testing was sometimes "a little 'nit picky'." He lost marks in one instance for writing a synonym for the expected ASL gloss.

The stress of tests presented another barrier. ". . . for me, it creates a lot of blocks," commented Pam, "It's been a strange thing because I've never had that before with exams - they've never bothered me at all." Required interaction with an unknown Deaf person during one exam situation added to her anxiety: It was with someone I'd never met before. Which added a huge stress for

> me, even though (Deaf person) was a really good person and (Deaf person) was easy to understand. Just. . . I'm not saying that's not a good situation, but I don't think it's a good <u>test</u> situation!

Lack of preparation time increased the stress for Olivia, making her efforts counterproductive:

> It's very difficult to make up a story, like, in a second or two, with a picture. So it's a very simple story, and so therefore your vocabulary will be much simpler. And also it's not really a learning. . . because you would use very simple words. Because you don't want to make a mistake.

"Obviously, if you're doing a test," she added, "anybody's got any brains will stay away from making a fool of themselves! Or from making mistakes, right?"

For several participants, uncertainty about the objectives of activities was a deterrent. In Olivia's account of a recent exam situation, it was a matter of communication breakdown: "I think that half the people didn't understand what (Instructor) wanted. And that was really tough. . . " Pam, after several levels in the program, admitted, "I don't know what their aim (of testing) is. You know - what the objective of the course is, what the objectives of those tests are?" A Level 4 student also confessed ignorance, referring to the format of a mid-term: "I'm not quite sure what the reason for doing the activity that way was, exactly."

Theme 5: Supports to Learning ASL

For every obstacle encountered during the ASL learning process, there appeared a comparable number of encouragements to counterbalance the effect. Learners at all levels identified elements that made the process easier for them, by providing needed support, feedback, practice, challenge, or enjoyment along the way.

Most often cited as a primary support was instructional style. Gerry, reflecting back on the positive nature of an earlier level, felt ". . . being so comfortable with that particular teacher . . . really helped me learn." Instructor sensitivity and ability to accommodate student levels were cited as supportive aspects by several learners. Olivia applauded the efforts of the instructor her first evening in Level 1: "(Instructor) started signing, and it was signing that everyone could understand, you know, this 'body language' thing, and it was

quite simple to understand . . . " Gerry, too, commended another instructor's "ability to communicate at our level."

Paula, who had already taken classes from several instructors, found them "very sensitive to our level of expertise, and constantly watching for even the most subtle feedback as to whether or not we understood the message. And re-presenting it or looking for another way of saying the same thing." They were "very willing," she felt, "to answer the same question 59 times." Laughed a learner very new to the program, "(Instructor) seems quite comfortable with the fact that we don't know what we are doing!" She too felt that "(Instructor) treats us at the level we should be at." Ted, who deemed his first instructor as "extremely capable," felt this person "really seemed to have a grasp of how difficult it would be. . . . Not just to understand, the mechanical parts of it, but the mental parts of it, the emotional. . . " The instructors "really understand," added Anita, ". . . that you are in the process of learning."

Instructor reinforcement and feedback, for most learners, boosted morale and provided needed encouragement. According to Robin, "(Instructor) is very concerned that we're learning and will make sure. . . . that we get the proper signs." For Pam, it was important that the instructors "don't correct everything you do wrong - just bits here and there. If they corrected everything," she laughed, "you'd just shut down and say 'forget it!" Generally, said Anita, "(Instructors) make you feel you're doing well - that makes you feel confident about it. And they understand that it's not your language - that you are just

learning."

Organized use of a variety of teaching strategies was appreciated. Describing the approach of a preferred instructor, Olivia said, "(Instructor) did the actual signing and . . . also had the overhead projector. So then it was the book, the overhead projector, and (the) visual - so you've got it three ways." Sensitivity of instructors to students wishing to take notes was acknowledged positively by the same learner: "(Instructor) would take note of people making notes, and would wait. It only takes a few seconds, you know, and it's not that much time."

Part of the reinforcement came through careful pacing of learning activities by the instructors: ". . . if you don't understand," said Robin, "(Instructor) really takes the time and will repeat it and repeat it, and repeat it until you get it. And then if you still don't get it, (Instructor) will write it on the blackboard." Olivia also praised instructors who took their time at the basic levels, since she felt this enabled students to "absorb it right away." She explained:

> If you get five words, one on top of the other, you can't absorb it as quickly as if somebody does it and then waits, you know, so that you can do it maybe yourself twice - once or twice. So that it sits in your brain.

"There's no question it was slow," she continued, referring to the beginning stages, "but it think that was a benefit - it was a plus. Nobody was bored."

Comparing two instructors, Gerry found that the structured pacing of one made the learning more effective:

> The (preferred instructor) would just stick to the basic lesson plan - throw in the little bits of culture here and there - but it was leveled for us. And it made sense, and that was enough. I mean, when you're going through two chapters in one night, y'know, maybe fifty new signs - that's enough. We don't need all the extra stuff piled on.

Modelling of correct ASL by instructors was also deemed beneficial. For Pam, ASL story-telling by instructors did much to add to her appreciation of the visual language:

> Because then (the language) moves, it shifts, it's not boring, mundane stuff - it's interesting. Plus you can see it as being different. . . as having its own characteristics that are different than spoken language. You really don't get that just from the textbook. But when someone's telling you a story or telling you a joke, and they're using all the space, and they're using their whole body - you get a glimpse of it anyway.

Instructor modelling of class drill exercises, she added, was "really helpful, because it's fine to practice with the small group but if all of you don't know what you're doing, you're not that much further ahead." Olivia agreed that it was "very, very important to have the instructor demonstrate." "If you're really foreign to the language," she explained, "it's nice to have somebody to show you exactly how it is. And even then sometimes you don't catch it - only after a few times. Or if somebody says you're doing it wrong."

The openness of instructors to learner feedback and comments was appreciated. Anita said it this way:

> (The instructors) always want your feedback to them - 'Okay , how do you feel, I'm too fast? I'm too slow? I'm too complicated? So stop me - if you don't understand something. Stop me and ask me'. So there's always that there.

Paula made a similar point about instructor response to student opinions that

were raised in class discussions: "I think that the statements are received openly - I didn't ever feel that my remarks were brushed off, as not important. I never ever had that feeling." She added her perception that instructors were "really willing for the most part to adapt to the needs of the group, and to make sure that whenever you ask a question, that it is always received warmly and . . . information is provided."

Instructors were generally credited with making the classroom a "safe kind of environment." "There's always a very warm environment," said Paula, "and people are encouraged to feel comfortable to take risks." She explained further: "I think the instructors really develop a nice relationship with their students - that there's a lot of effort put into getting to know the students, as individuals, and getting to know a little bit about them. . ." Other learners reiterated the feeling of safety. "(Instructor) doesn't intimidate the learning at all," said Robin. "(Instructor) didn't make it frightening at all," echoed Pam, who had initially feared the immersion setting.

Part of feeling safe, for Paula, came from the instructor emphasis on communication over form in the classroom. She explained it thus:

> One thing I really appreciate in the classes, and I would say it's been universal in all of the classes and with all of the teachers - is the first priority is always communication and there is always, oh I guess - a sort of unwritten rule of 'listen to what I mean rather than what I might sign.

"I think," Paula went on, "that there's a feeling that those things will come with increased communication." Anita expressed a similar view:

> In one way, the classes and the instructors make you feel that it's easy. In class. . . if you have a joke to sign, you do it. And, well, they laugh - and, fine. And they never say, 'well, you use English', or 'you use ASL', or whatever. So that makes you feel confident - 'I'm doing it!' Probably it's not right - but I'm doing it, and people are understanding what I said!

Humor was another instructional support, cited by five out of the seven learners interviewed. Said Pam, who included "a good sense of humor" among requisites for a good instructor, "that's the best part of this class - where they tell you stories or jokes or whatever." Ted, too, felt this was an important component of his instructor's effectiveness, explaining: "(Instructor) would use the appropriate amount of comedy and lightness, or seriousness, whatever. . . " Gerry agreed, with this comment about one of his instructors: "It was a 'fun' learning experience. (Instructor) made it a lot of fun to be there, and to learn." Anita, describing the humor in her class, said, "We make jokes, we make fun of people. . . " "When you can laugh in a class," she continued, "I think that makes you. . . yeah, you feel comfortable in the class."

Olivia recalled one instructor in particular who used natural humor well. "(Instructor) was very funny," she said, "so it sort of relaxed everybody right off the bat." Commenting "you can't take life too seriously," Olivia reiterated what this meant for her:

> . . . you've got these people there, in the evening. They've had a full day already, you know. And. . . I think to put a bit of humor in it wouldn't hurt any. You know, I think that adds to a class. Firstly, it adds to the camaraderieship (sic) of the group. And it relaxes everybody - you're not so uptight!

"To me," she went on, "humor is . . . part of life! If you can't laugh at things, then

you've got a tough life!"

Classroom immersion in the target language was also deemed a support to learning. Despite some initial trepidation, the approach ultimately won plaudits from all seven learners. Gerry used a "sink or swim" analogy to clarify his stance:

> As far as the immersion approach goes, it has its pros and cons. I would like to have a hearing instructor - to explain these things that you miss. I mean, obviously, there's details involved that can't be explained properly to us - 'cuz we just don't know enough about the language. So I can see a hearing instructor being beneficial there. But the reasoning behind the immersion, I can understand. I mean, that's the only way - you just gotta jump in and totally submerge.

"At the beginning," Ted felt, "it hampers you, because you don't know what to expect, and you don't really know what's going on." After a short time in the class, however, he decided, ". . . I think having somebody that's Deaf and uses (ASL) is as easy, or as good (as a hearing instructor would be)." Pam, who vividly recalled her first fearful reaction to the notion of immersion, saw the value later. "I'm really pleased it was a Deaf instructor," she said, "I think you learn a lot faster that way." Entering the program with "no indication" that it was immersion, Robin remembered a similar first reaction: ". . . at first I thought 'Oh, maybe I don't want to do this then! Because maybe I need someone to tell me what these words are.' But once you get into it, I think it's a lot more effective."

Paula, too, was pleased with the "complete breakaway from English" in the classroom. She felt it was particularly important for those learners who had limited opportunity for involvement with Deaf people. "For me," she said, "my

exposure to Deaf adults comes from getting to know my teachers." Olivia agreed that the immersion was "great." "I think it's the 'correct' way of doing it," she went on, adding, "the only problem I have is if I really want to ask questions." For Anita, too, immersion was "the best way to learn." "I think the best way to do it," she explained, alluding back to the "sink or swim" analogy, "is when you have to do it."

For some students, external learning experiences had an effect on their acquisition of ASL. Anita, comfortably fluent in two spoken languages before her attempt to learn ASL, felt that her previous second language learning had a positive impact on her present progress, that it helped her "to understand sign language - and to think in another way." She elaborated on the effect:

> Your brain is already working - that is not what you were used to doing. So I learned (another spoken language), and am still in the process of learning - I mean everyday and all my life, I think! But looking at that way, I could understand. I don't ask questions - 'why sign language?' or 'why does that sign mean that?' I don't need to know that. I need to know the meaning, I need to know how to do it. But I know why you do it. So I think that really helped me to improve, and not block myself to that.

Not only did she feel "more open" to learning ASL, but she felt more ready "to learn about the people too." "I think I have learned a lot about Canadian people. . . ," she continued, "about different other cultures. . . " Gerry, reflecting on his own background, agreed: "I obviously would have an awareness of how different cultures can be. I mean, I came from one culture into another one."

Anita also found her drama study useful to her ASL learning. "That's helped me too in my signing because the expressions, you know - facial

expression is so important in sign language - so the drama course is helping me do that too." Pam, another learner struggling to improve her facial expression, agreed that this would certainly be a useful supplement. "I think for me," she said, "I need more drama instruction, or something like that."

More often than not, peers were pronounced a source of support. Simply knowing that "everyone's in the same boat" made the learning easier for Pam. "(Mistakes are) accepted as part of the process. . .," she went on, "you don't ever have people laughing at you." "And the fact that everyone else is in the same position. . . that makes it a lot easier," echoed Robin. "I notice in class that the other students are also very nervous," observed Olivia, "so it makes me feel a bit better." "We are all the same," reiterated Anita, "no one is better than anybody else. You could see that some people are better signers, but still - I mean, I am learning. And they are in the same level that I am. So he is no better, or she is no better, than I am!"

Moving from one level to the next with the same classmates had its merits, according to Gerry:

> We've got a real nice close-knit group - the same people that've gone through Level 1 and Level 2. We're getting a lot closer, so we can sit down and discuss our problems a lot more openly with each other. It's becoming kind of a 'social' thing.

Beyond the shared experience, hands-on practice with classmates often produced a feeling of mutual support as well. Ted, who saw "the level(s) of dedication" in his class as diverse, identified with those "who were really

wanting to be there." Practice with a motivated partner was usually very productive for him, as he described of one such encounter: "I was paired up with somebody who really wanted to be there. And we just went back and forth and back and forth, and it was actually a good learning experience." For Pam, having a friend in the class was helpful. "(My friend) understood better than I did in Level 1 and 2, and she'd just translate if I was really stuck!" she laughed, "Or else she'd sign it to me, and I could understand her." "It was a crutch, yeah!" she freely admitted, adding about her friend that it "probably was good for her - she probably learned better!"

Peer relationships were forged outside the classroom as well. Ted described the typical coffee break scene in Level 1, when "the students. . . grouped around two tables and sort of nervously drank their Diet Coke." Breaks, he went on, were an opportunity to fill in the gaps: "We would discuss, 'what does this mean, what does this mean?" Gerry agreed: "So you sit down at coffee break or after (class) - and you iron out the things that you missed out in class."

Several students felt that the exposure to a variety of Deaf signers within the program advanced their learning of ASL by developing flexibility. For Anita, having a different instructor at each level "helps, because no (two) persons sign the same." "Each of them have different signs, or sign things differently," she explained, "But you get used to that - and you expect everyone will not sign exactly the same." Gerry, too, recognized the benefit, despite his acknowledged

preference for a favorite instructor. "Personally, I would like to stay with the same teacher all the way through the program," he admitted, "although I realize the importance of having different styles of signing." Paula enjoyed having Deaf models visit her class for the same reason:

> I think it's really interesting because I see such a difference in signing styles, that I find I really get used to the signing style of my teacher. And when someone signs a little bit differently, I find it takes me a while to recognize the sign.

"(Interaction with new Deaf people) broadens what I recognize. . . ," she elaborated, " I see the sign as defined much more flexibly than maybe what I was initially using, and expecting to see."

A number of respondents mentioned the realism of learning activities as a benefit to their ASL development. Robin, for instance, spoke of the practical utility of ASL vocabulary taught at the beginning: "At this level. . . I think the words that we're learning are very useful. And I think it's quite easy to carry on a conversation with the vocabulary that we have." She felt the homework assignments were also exemplary, since they "are more practical kinds of things that you would use. They seem to expand a lot on what we've learned - and they make use of what we've learned very well."

For Paula, homework activities provided the desired link between the target language and her own experience:

> I find the homework activities to be really good for (reinforcing) - to look at a collection of grammatical structures and then to be given the assignment, to go away and videotape a story, using four of the skills that we've discussed . . . I find that's really useful. And again it becomes a

> fairly 'real' communication - it's telling my story, rather than generating sentences completely out of context. It is a real experience.

Olivia found that presenting homework assignments in front of the class added to the 'reality' of the task. "You had to make sure they understood what you were saying," she said, "If you're practicing it by yourself, it doesn't have the same . . . reason for doing it."

Pam liked the cultural lessons for their direct practical applicability. Referring to a lesson on culturally-appropriate conversational topics, she admitted ruefully that such practical and necessary information might be otherwise inaccessible. ". . . unless you know someone really well,' she said, "they're not going to tell you that." ". . . after we talked about it in class," she went on, "I thought 'oh' - might not like it, but at least you understand where it's coming from."

Even informal and inadvertent learning opportunities were useful. Robin described one such occasion, a spontaneous after-class social encounter involving several classmates and her Deaf instructor. Although initially uncertain about the communication, she found herself pleasantly surprised. "Actually," she explained, "it worked out really well, and we were able - what we couldn't sign - we would use the alphabet for the word. And then (Instructor) would tell us what the sign was." For Robin, the incident was a positive one:

> I think I probably appreciated it for a learning experience, because we could use it in an informal way. And we could ask questions, that we necessarily didn't know the words for - but it was okay because (Instructor) told us the sign for it.

Learners at all levels agreed that regular feedback was a necessary and desirable support. "You've got to have someone there," Ted stressed, "who says, 'no, that's not how you do it, it's this way." According to Olivia, useful feedback came from both classmates and instructors in the classroom setting. Paula noted the value of "the individualized feedback" from instructors, for videotaped assignments. Pam agreed, adding this comment: "It's nice when it's your turn - you've got (Instructor) right there, going through it with you. Cuz you watch the videotape together, and then they show you corrections and whatever."

For at least four female learners, making mistakes was perceived as a requisite hurdle in the learning process. "They're a very common occurrence. I'm really quite used to it!" laughed Paula. Pam viewed making mistakes as a necessary evil. "I don't like it," she said, quickly adding, "That's been a really good thing, though, for me." Robin simply took it in stride, noting a distinction for visual language learning: "(Making mistakes) doesn't seem as bad (as with spoken languages), because you can't hear it, I guess. It's not such a blow to your self-esteem when you don't get it right."

Anita saw mistakes as crucial to her progress: "If I don't make mistakes, I won't know if I am really learning. Like, when you make mistakes, they correct you. And then you realize, 'yeah, that's right. I'm doing that wrong. So I better do <u>that</u>." "Of course, if I do everything right,' she laughed, "I'm very good! But I really don't have the understanding of really - I'm <u>really</u> learning, I'm really

doing what is right."

Personal learning strategies were cited by all respondents as a further aid to learning. The preferred strategy, where feasible, was real life interaction with Deaf people outside the class setting. Anita recalled her elation on the occasions when she had met someone with whom she could practice:

> I had met (a Deaf college student) here a few times - like, (student) has come, sometimes, to the college. And it's nice when I see somebody that could sign, and it's here - 'Oh, it's great - somebody to practice with!' And so we . . . talk in the cafeteria - we're signing - and that's great!

Anita related plans to avail herself of further opportunities: "What I'm planning to do is volunteer at the Alberta School for the Deaf, in the spring. I hope to go there - that will help me a lot."

Pam found it "really helpful for the students to be included in the events at the Deaf Cultural Centre - or at least to have that opportunity." Gerry agreed: "I try to get involved in as many Deaf social events - outside of class." For Paula, interaction within the Deaf community revealed the true purpose of her new language: "You're offending someone if you're not giving your very best effort to communicate. So I think there's a relationship that develops, and the communication is what sustains it."

To supplement real interaction in the community, regular self-initiated ASL practice activities served a worthwhile purpose. In Anita's words, "That makes a lot of difference. You have to practice and use it." Echoed Olivia, "If you don't practice, you don't gain it." Study sessions with classmates were one

such avenue. Gerry felt it was to his benefit "to sign as much as I can, away from class - whether it's at home, with the study group - get together once in awhile with other classmates and just sign."

As a readily available alternative, solitary practice functioned, for some, to reinforce what had already been learned. Viewing resource videotapes was perceived as more useful at the lower levels. A Level 3 learner, for example, recalled watching videotapes regularly "at the beginning." For another, in the second level, viewing videotapes "was really good because again, I guess that's like an instructor showing you what to do. And so to me, that's the biggest plus, is having somebody demonstrate." A basic level respondent felt she had discovered a worthwhile TV program: ". . . they also have, on Saturday mornings, a TV program 'American Sign Language', so I tape that. . . "

Another practice strategy deemed useful by some learners was simple repetition. "I know," said Pam, "if I practice doing the signs, then it stays with me a little bit better." Anita agreed: "If I do things over and over, it will help me to learn it better." "I usually practice with myself, in the mirror," she confessed.

> Robin tried to make practice part of her daily routine:
> I find when I'm talking to (my spouse) or my parents or my family that I'll sign the word that I'm saying in the sentence. I won't do the whole sentence, but, like . . . if a word comes up that I know, I'll sign it.

Olivia volunteered a rather innovative strategy to merge her solitary ASL practice with her love for hockey:

> I sit at hockey games . . . and I sign. Like, you're watching the game, and you see all the advertising on the thing. And I sit there, so that nobody

> can see what I'm doing. With my hand between my legs, like this, and the other hand on top - and I fingerspell everything . . .

Imitation was another cited strategy, for use in the classroom. Robin described what she would do: "Just imitate when (Instructor)'s talking to us, or telling us what our assignment is, and if there's a new word, I'll imitate it . . . it helps, to increase the vocabulary anyway." Olivia used the same technique for new vocabulary: "(Instructor) would sign a word, and then you would immediately do it. . . " Pam agreed, explaining why copying was important to her:

> I need that kinesthetic part to it. And I do that . . . when the instructor's going through vocabulary and showing you, I notice a lot of people copying it. So you get the 'feel' of it besides the 'look' of it.

Association, too, helped some students make sense of the new language. A beginning learner had this to say:

> I usually try and equate . . . American Sign Language seems to make a lot of sense to me, in their symbols for words. And so I try and think, 'What does this look like? Does this look like the word?' And that sorta thing . . . and that's how I remember things.

Similarly, a more advanced learner found it useful ". . . to try and tie something new to what I already know. And I tend to look for a lot of similarities in English and ASL."

At the beginning stages, prediction was another practical learning tool. One beginner noted that he simply used common sense and cued into contextual cues when he was uncertain about new vocabulary. Another, recalling early levels, concurred: "At the beginning you don't know what

exactly the instructor is signing, but you guess."

Theme 6: Personal Growth

For all participants, there was perceived growth beyond the language learning. Personal development came in many guises; all were rewarding.

Understanding a different perspective and developing empathy were the benefits for several learners. Ted spoke of the ASL experience as "sort of a journey into something that not many people will try." A gain of new insights from the immersion environment balanced the inevitable frustrations of the setting. "It allows you a chance to put yourself in somebody else's shoes," he went on, "You get a notion of how (Instructor) feels through what you feel." Pam's sentiment was similar: "It probably equalizes things a little bit - you can imagine a little bit more what it's like to be Deaf in a hearing world." Ted felt the experience would be good for anyone:

> It's something I would recommend to people, even if it was just to get another perspective. This is the way some people really live. It's like, I dunno, going camping - this is something that's completely different. And there are people that live this way. So you should be aware of it.

For Robin, an assignment to wear earplugs around the house and then write about the experience was especially worthwhile. She felt it provided her with "better insight into what it was like to be Deaf and to 'live' Deaf."

Greater visual awareness was another positive side effect of learning ASL. In Pam's words, "I've noticed that it's affecting other parts of my life

besides ASL. . . I'm just more visually aware of things now than I was before." Anita agreed that "you 'see' things better." For her, part of becoming more "visual" was learning to tune out sound. "One thing you do in sign language," she clarified, " - is learn how to block sound - how to 'isolate' yourself. That's part of growing into the culture."

New self-awareness was noted. Pam said it like this: "I felt like I was really opening up a lot of areas in myself that I hadn't explored before. . . I think it was that it was so different than anything I'd done before. It's more emotional than most things." Olivia had a similar thought: ". . . it certainly has made me become more aware of my facial expressions and my body language. And, yeah, maybe it has made me more expressive."

On a related note, some scholars claimed an increase in confidence and pride as part of the learning experience. Robin described her feeling:

> . . . I have more confidence - that I can communicate with people that aren't hearing. That I can reach more people, that there's not the barrier that I thought there was. So - more comfortable, maybe, with different. . . with non-hearing people.

"I think I've learned a lot," was Paula's comment, "I'm really pleased with my progress." For Anita, too, achievement felt good. She described the kind of incident that gave her that feeling of accomplishment:

> I came across a few people, like in the market, or garage sales. . . and I noticed they were Deaf. So I wanted to say 'hi' at least! And I did! And I said 'hi', and 'I'm studying sign language', and at least I had a little conversation with them! And that felt good.

Gerry's story of a satisfying encounter with a former Deaf colleague

displayed the obvious pride in his achievement:

> This fellow I used to work with years and years ago. To meet him, just recently, and to use the little bit of signs that I knew. And to actually have a simple, basic conversation with this guy for the first time since I've known him. . .

"I saw the reaction in him too," Gerry continued, "it made him feel good, that 'here's this guy - we used to pass notes'. . . " "To actually meet this guy and have a conversation with him. . . ," he finished, "that's something I'll always remember."

For Anita, the discovery of a passion for learning was among the most satisfying parts of her ASL experience. She described her realization:

> I could go on forever (about ASL), because I really feel a passion for it - I didn't know that I had that! And I think - that's one thing that happened - and I didn't know that I could be passionate to something, like that!

She summed up her feeling aptly:

> I have learned so much - about me, about the people in the Deaf community, about people in general. And about Deaf people and the Deaf community. And I know that I could learn so much.

CHAPTER 5

Desired Program Changes

While overall satisfaction with this ASL program was readily and often enthusiastically acknowledged by the entire sample of respondents, all offered suggestions that would refine the learning experience for them. Suggestions have been included in their entirety, whether or not there was agreement by others. For ease of reference, comments have been categorized according to program area, as outlined in Table 5.

Program Format

Some uncertainty about program goals was evident in this sample of learners. An effort to make both program and instructor goals more explict at the outset would be deemed as beneficial by those who raised the point. Knowing the objectives of specific activities was also seen as a need.

Several learners agreed that diverse learner goals should be considered in program planning. One possible resolution of this concern came from a novice learner who suggested a choice of class options: "Maybe break it down into different divisions - people that definitely want to interpret - they should be in a different class. And there are people, like myself, who really just want to learn to communicate a little."

A learner in Level 3 saw the issue differently; she felt that such a split

Table 5
Desired Program Changes (Part A)

Program Format Consider diverse learner goals in program planning. Make program & instructor goals explicit from the beginning. Provide different classes for different learner goals. Reinforce the no-voice policy.
Learning Activities Teach practical vocabulary early in the program. Include more spontaneous practice in class at the upper levels. Balance live homework presentations with videotaped assignments. Introduce more useful strategies for remembering signs. Explain the goals of specific activities.
Cultural Training Provide basic cultural lessons early in the program. Demonstrate the use of cultural technology. Teach Deaf cultural values in a more neutral & descriptive way. Provide opportunity for discussion following emotional or "heavy" topics.
Interaction with Deaf Signers Bring in Deaf models at lower levels, for story-telling and real conversation. Offer regular exposure to a variety of Deaf models at all levels. Structure assignments around attendance of Deaf socials.

Table 5
Desired Program Changes (Part B)

Opportunities for Further Practice & Feedback Arrange for instructors to give individual feedback outside classtime. Have a weekly conversational class to complement each formal class. Review more vocabulary from previous levels. Offer opportunities for more peer coaching by higher level students. Arrange informal practice sessions during or after classes. Offer short total immersion sessions in spring or summer.
Use of Resources Emphasize and encourage the use of resources. Make resources more accessible and available. Make study guide purchases optional, if required minimally. Make reserve readings optional/reduce number required at upper levels. "Canadianize" materials.
Testing Procedures Eliminate testing completely, and replace it with an interview process. Increase flexibility in marking exams. Provide practice and modelling of test format before the exams. Provide comprehensive feedback after exams. Revise the marking criteria to allow for more spontaneous use of ASL. Test only what has been taught in class. Distribute marks more fairly, particularly in the upper levels.
Access to the Program Allow priority phone-in registration for learners already in the program.

"won't encourage the people who are doing it for fun." From her stance, a mixed class was preferable: "If you have the mix of both, I think they will support each other in that way." A second level learner saw the formal structure of the current format as necessary. "You have to have a standard, and then everyone takes what they want from it," she asserted, "You can't be so flexible in a program that you can adjust to everyone's needs."

Some discomfort was expressed relating to abuse of the "no-voice" policy in the classroom. As a crucial component of the immersion approach, it was felt to warrant attention. One learner said it this way: "I think it would be beneficial if (the no-voice rule) was perhaps reinforced a bit more. Either by peers, or by the instructor - insisting that nobody talk." Others noted that it was regularly emphasized, and felt this should be continued. "We are hearing, talking people," said one, justifying the need for occasional reminders.

Learning Activities

For at least one novice, learning more practical vocabulary earlier in the program would be of benefit. "For example," she said midway through the first level, "we haven't learned 'bathroom' yet!" A second level learner echoed the sentiment with this comment: "I've had the simplest, most basic conversations with Deaf people - and gotten stuck on vocabulary."

As a supplement to the regular structured practices, an upper level learner suggested more spontaneous, unrehearsed practice in the classroom:

"If you gave the situation and people had to act it out - might work better. Although you wouldn't be using the same vocabulary all the time." Several others agreed that the idea had merit, for the more advanced levels in particular. To lessen intimidation and maximize benefit, added a senior level scholar, such practice need only occur with partners or within small groups.

At the most advanced level, one participant voiced her conviction that class activities should reflect the needs of all learners. As one who preferred doing videotaped assignments (versus live presentations) in later stages of the program, she felt it would be useful to offer the same option at earlier stages, as a way of relieving undue stress for beginners. ". . . that was kind of nice - that there wasn't this 'performance' quality to the homework in the upper levels," she clarified, "And so I would really encourage the use of videotapes at the lower levels too." "Different people do have different learning needs," she stressed.

Another disagreed, citing the need for feedback: "I would prefer to keep doing the 'live' thing - the camera doesn't give any response!" "Maybe - one assignment that has to be videotaped," she added as an afterthought, "But make sure you get the response the other way too."

A beginner commended the introduction of useful memory strategies, and wondered if there were others. She gave examples:

> When teaching ASL . . . (Instructor) explained to us this is the 'man' part (indicating upper half of the head) and this is the 'woman' part (indicating lower half of the head). But maybe (add) this is your 'feeling' part (indicating chest area) and maybe what specific fingers mean - that would probably help too. . .

A third level learner, admitting some uncertainty about the components of a visual language, felt it would be helpful to have the distinctions between ASL and English clarified in class discussion.

Cultural Training

A desire for cultural lessons in basic etiquette "a bit earlier" was voiced by one basic level learner:

> . . . maybe have a little bit more of the culture part at the beginning of the year, for example, eye contact, and what you can and can't do when two Deaf people are talking - you can walk through them or you can't. . . what to do when you want to get their attention. . .

Coverage of Deaf history and technology was "fine placed where it was," she hastened to add. A more seasoned learner agreed there was a need for the basics at Level 1: "At least mention it."

The same novice learner expressed curiosity about cultural technology: "We saw it in our lecture, but we didn't really see how it worked. . . " Could it be demonstrated, she wondered?

> . . . get (a video) with the, whatever. . . converter thing - you know, where they have the subtitles? Just so that we can experience that - maybe bring in the 'Bill Cosby Show' or something with captions - just so that we can see. . .

A third level scholar liked the idea too. "I've never seen (a TTY)," she said, "I don't know how it works."

At higher levels of the program, lectures and videos on cultural attitudes and values prompted strong reactions. A large part of the concern centred on

what was perceived as an emotional presentation style. In the words of one long-time student who would like to see cultural issues offered "from a more neutral point of view":

> I think there tends to be a fair bit of blaming involved. And how to get away from that, and simply describe the culture - I don't know how that can best be accomplished, but I think it would be really valuable to explore.

After viewing a video on Deaf identity, one learner described her feelings: "When we finished seeing that, I thought 'why am I studying?' 'Why do I want to be an interpreter, if I won't be accepted?' I felt really frustrated. . . I felt - 'why should I bother?' " She felt that time to debrief as a class would have made the experience more positive: "I think they should have showed it at the beginning of class - and made a discussion after." Another student who had reacted similarly reinforced the need for discussion time after "heavy" topics.

Interaction with Deaf Signers

Interaction with Deaf signers was suggested as beneficial for every level, but particularly at the formative stages of the program. A second level learner expressed a wish that more Deaf people would come in simply to share their personal experiences with the class. She felt this would refine understanding of their unique culture and lifestyle: "It enhances the whole thing." Ideally, there would also be opportunity for questions and open discussion. A more recent entrant to the program voiced a similar hope:

> . . . would be interesting - to have a guest speaker maybe, one night - of a Deaf person. And they could come in and share their personal history maybe - put more of a personal touch on Deaf people . . . take the stereotype away from what a Deaf person is, and what a Deaf person does. . .

As a further benefit, it was suggested that regular exposure to "outside" Deaf models would reduce the stress that accompanied interaction with new Deaf people for exam purposes.

While encouragement of attendance at local Deaf functions was seen as a postive program feature, there were apparent drawbacks to doing it. A third level learner felt that some structure might add appeal:

> One problem with those social events at the Cultural Centre, is that there's nothing to do. Like, you could work something - like you're working on a project or cooking or. . . I don't know, something where you've got something to do, and the talk is just a natural part of that. I don't know how you could set that up. . . it would seem to me to be a good way to learn!

Another student at the same level was very honest about her feeling: ". . . if I <u>have</u> to do it, I'll do it - and I will have had a lot more interaction with the community." She elaborated further:

> It's something that probably will make me go, even though it shouldn't be that you <u>have</u> to go because they make you do it. . . but I think it would help many people to decide and then do it. And then you will get to know people in that way. And knowing Deaf people also will involve you more in the community, and will help you to get to know them better - and you will make friends from there. And then you will have the opportunity to practice more. . .

Another learner expressed reservations about the notion of enforced attendance. "Encourage, but don't evaluate" was her recommendation.

Opportunities for Further Practice & Feedback

Practice and feedback were consistently deemed an important part of the learning process. Several suggestions centred on maximizing individual feedback while minimizing time expenditure. Rather than allotting class time to individual feedback for homework assignments, one learner suggested arranging ". . . one night where people just signed up for a chunk of time and came in, one-on-one," outside the regular class time. If it was necessary to have one-on-one feedback during class time, suggested another, instructors could perhaps plan to have another Deaf person available as a resource for the rest of the class.

For those with time to spare, the option of an informal second weekly class would be appreciated, claimed at least one program learner. "Have they ever tried having the classes, like one night a week," she wondered, "and then another night, have just a - like, a conversational night? I think that would work."

Review of the vocabulary from previous levels was the suggestion of a scholar who felt such a need existed for her. She explained:

> . . . there seems to be - in Level 3 - they seem to feel you already have the vocabulary and that's not true. You might have seen it a couple times, but you certainly don't <u>have</u> it solidified - like, it's not just at your fingertips.

The same learner expressed a desire to practice with a higher level of expertise than her peers could provide. Acknowledging the obvious limitations of a single instructor, she had a ready solution in mind for small group practices:

"What would really work well would be if you had people from other (higher) levels come in, and work with small groups. In practicing those exercises or dialogues or whatever." She saw this arrangement as one that could provide mutual benefit:

> . . . lots of people at coffee break and stuff are always sort of. . . the same complaint, 'Oh, well, we only do this once a week!' So if you had maybe - say, 'well, you could come into Level 1 and help. . . it might work."

Another Level 3 student was firm in her resistance to such an idea. Her comment was brief but clear: "I would feel uncomfortable with a higher class student."

Recognizing the value of informal practice, one respondent expressed her wish for such opportunities both in and out of the classroom. She made this claim:

> I found it very helpful, in signing in (an informal setting with Deaf people). And actually 'speaking' in a conversational way to the instructor. . . .And that could be really good, if they could incorporate more of that, instead of strictly the classroom setting.

She wanted something more spontaneous than the normal classroom practice: "If we stopped class maybe half an hour early, and said, 'oh well, let's just go to the coffeeroom and we'll just talk or something like that. . .' " She continued: "And not. . . 'these are the words that you're practicing this week, so you have to use them in these sentences' and that sort of thing. . . more 'conversational' type."

Support of the immersion approach was reflected in recommendations

that it be extended. Some ideas? A three-week total immersion session in the spring or summer was suggested, as was a "Deaf" camping weekend or a cultural retreat. The key point of all possibilities offered was lots of interaction with the language and culture. Paula summed it up:

> I need to eat, sleep, and live and breathe in the language and culture. Three hours a week, although it's immersion for those three hours, or most of those three hours - it's not enough to feel that I'm living in the language.

Use of Resources

While the value of program resources was acknowledged by most respondents, actual utilization of resources appeared to fall short. Reasons were diverse, and prompted some possible remedies. A second level learner felt, in retrospect, that she should have used more resources earlier. She claimed that more encouragement to do so would have made a difference: ". . . I think they could've emphasized the library (resources) a little stronger, like sort of really said, 'you must. . . it is here for you if you need it'."

Improved access to resources was posed as a need. A Level 2 respondent suggested a greater variety of practice videotapes: ". . . it would be nice if there were more, so you could take something else . Because once you've taken out fingerspelling this week, and in two weeks - you're not going to forget it." Another, at a more advanced level, wondered if there could be a series of tapes made for higher levels of skill. As an example, she felt that

stories with follow-up comprehension questions would be helpful. At the second level, one participant noted "the Level 1 tapes were just too fast for me," and requested a more basic series.

Also related to accessibility, one student questioned the reason for limiting some tapes to use only on library premises. For an adult education class, she felt it essential to have more than one copy for outside circulation. Given the busy schedule of most class members, extending the library loan period for books was also encouraged.

A relatively new learner wondered how much use she would get from her study guide purchase in Level 1. She explained:

> . . . we take the sentences out of the study guide, but that's all we're using it for. And it's used on the overhead - so to me, I'm not really getting my money's worth from it. It's a big thing - when you spend that much.

If anticipated use of the materials was clarified at the outset, she felt people could make informed choices about whether to purchase or not.

The required reading of resource books drew strong comments. At the most advanced level, a student felt "the readings are excessive." An intermediate level respondent claimed the right of choice:

> . . . I think I'd take the books outa there. I'm not sure why they have that as part of the course, that you have to read those books. I think if people are interested, they'll read them. It'd be fine to give a book list. If people are interested. . . they shouldn't have to read it, to take a sign language course.

At least one learner disagreed. "If you don't have to do it, you probably won't do

it" was her comment.

A further area of concern related to textbooks. Three participants commented on the American content, and wondered if alternatives were available. "Update the materials," offered one person, "and 'Canadianize' them."

Testing Procedures

The student assessment format was another area that brought sharp comments. One upper level respondent felt that testing had negligible value in such a program. In the true spirit of a general interest, non-credit program, she suggested, it should be eliminated entirely. She offered her notion of a viable substitute:

> I would much rather see a sort of interview process at the end, where the instructor and student sit down and talk about, 'well, how do you feel - these are the kinds of things we expect that you would have under control, you know, at the end point of this course. I think you have them under control - how do you feel?' You know, that kind of process, where it's really the student deciding whether they feel competent to go on, with some knowledge of what is expected in the next level. And the instructor offering their guidance as to whether or not they feel the student would be comfortable at the next level.

The same learner expressed her belief that the hidden purpose of testing was to measure interpreting potential, and reiterated the need for consideration of individual learner goals in the design of assessment. A Level 3 learner agreed that her needs could be satisfied without exams: ". . . then I could just worry about what I wanted to get out of it. And that's just basic communication."

At the other end of the spectrum, an intermediate student placed considerable value on testing. "You know how well you are doing," she said, "You know you are doing okay. Or you know it is worth it to keep going or not." A second level learner agreed that having some testing measure was worthwhile.

Several students saw a need for more flexibility in the marking of exams. Most felt that for receptive tests, equivalent written meanings should be allowed in English as well as in ASL glosses. According to a Level 3 student, writing ASL glosses was particularly difficult at the lower levels. ". . . at the beginning," she felt, "I think they have to be concentrating on the meaning, not the exact structure." A current Level 1 learner struggled with the task, commenting: "For me, it's difficult to translate the visual ASL into written ASL." "Is it important in ASL," she asked, "to write down the exact signs in the exact sequence they were 'said' - or is it important just to grasp the meaning?" For this learner at least, understanding the meaning was a clear priority.

In a similar vein, a third level student felt that general meaning should be stressed over story details on receptive exams. As an alternative to questions about story details, she suggested this: "If you told the story and then said, 'write what the story was about', then they could tell if the person had a pretty good understanding." Some students acknowledged that their instructors already did this.

It would be useful, according to one student, to have the test format

practiced or modelled in class before the actual event. She also expressed a wish for more time to go through the test with the instructor afterwards. Others noted that these features were already offered by their instructors, and that they were indeed beneficial.

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with mandated inclusion of specific ASL features in their expressive test segments, commenting that it posed a conflict to spontaneous and natural use of the language. Yet another student recognized the conflict but could see no solution. "When I'm signing,' she said, "I'm trying to do it as naturally as possible - and I'm not thinking about what I'm using." She continued: "It's hard, to start thinking about it. But yet you need to know it."

A lower level student complained that testing occasionally included unfamiliar sign vocabulary. He saw this as unfair, especially in formative stages of the program: "Y'know - stick to what's been covered in class. Test us on what wo should know."

A final point relating to assessment addressed mark distribution. Comments by students at the two upper levels indicated strong objection to the weighting of the final exam at 60 - 75% of the total course grade. One respondent, noting that students are inevitably "under pressure. . . under stress" during exams, said it simply: ""It's not fair, for me!" The rationale for such an unbalanced distribution was an admitted mystery to the learners.

Access to the Program

A senior level student expressed concern about class registration procedures. "In the winter session, you can just register by telephone or whatever," she explained, "But of course to register for a fall session one must go and stand in line at the J. P. campus. . . " Inquiries about the process had been fruitless, and she wondered at the rationale for the system. Her suggestion was simple:

> I think that students, particularly students that are already within the program, should be able to advance register. And therefore receive priority over people that are coming into the program. And if the classes are filling up, I guess that just means they need to offer more sections!

CHAPTER 6

Discussion of Results

This study grew out of a desire to provide a clearer picture of the experience of adults who are learning American Sign Language, with the hope of offering new insight to program planners, instructors, and students themselves. To satisfy the purposes of an exploratory study, I decided on personal interviews as the most appropriate method of data collection. Seven ASL learners of diverse backgrounds and skill levels served as subjects over a four month period. Following analysis, six general descriptive patterns, or themes, were derived from the data. In addition, suggested changes to the ASL program were categorized according to topic.

The six thematic clusters addressed learning motivation, attitudes toward the target language and culture, cognitive and affective features of the learning transition, barriers and supports encountered, and personal side effects of the experience. My intent in this section is to discuss the research findings by relating them to theory and research in the field, and by offering my own interpretations and reflections. Some findings were at first surprising, others more predictable. While results were generally consistent with adult and second language learning theories offered in the literature, some exceptions were apparent in the visual language area.

The Experience of the Adult ASL Learner

Theme 1: Pursuit of Individual Goals

Perhaps the most important finding of all related directly to learner motivation for undertaking the study of ASL. Learners came to the program with very individual learning agendas which in turn played an important role in shaping their entire learning experiences. Examination of current literature confirms this diversity as one typical attribute of adult learners.

According to Malcolm Knowles, several basic assumptions distinguish adult learners from children: a genuine desire to know; a responsible, self-directed self-concept; a diversity of life experiences; a readiness to learn; a life-centred orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles, 1980, 1984). Dickinson (1973) concurs, describing adults as highly differentiated, independent, having a variety of experiences, and concerned with immediate problems. Cranton (1989) reinforces the notion of diversity. By simple virtue of age, adults have lived longer and experienced more of life than children. "Learning is facilitated," she says, "when the instruction is related to these experiences" (1989: 17). She reiterates the very personal nature of learning goals that were well illustrated in this study:

> Since the adult has *chosen* to learn, he will have clear and specific goals related to his own needs, whether it be an improvement in job skills or a desire for social contact. The adult learners will expect the instructional situation to be relevant to their needs (italics theirs,1989: 17)

Houle delineates three types of adults who pursue continuing education

(Knowles, 1984); all are represented in the ASL sample of learners. Goal-oriented learners have clear-cut objectives for their education. Activity-oriented learners enjoy active involvement for the social contact it offers, while the learning-oriented seek knowledge for its growth potential. Kanchier (1987) would perhaps label the latter group "questers" - learners who tend to keep their options open, seek new challenges, find appeal in risk, and would likely enter a program searching for growth opportunities toward a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Carl Rogers too (Cranton, 1989) emphasizes self-actualization of the learner as the ultimate goal of education.

Second language studies offer a further source of insight into the motivation of ASL learners. Review of the literature suggests notable commonalities between the two disciplines: current emphasis on practical communicative fluency vs. grammatical perfection (Walker, 1976; Galyean, 1976; Krashen, 1980; Rivers, 1983, Kulmatycki , 1987), culture study (Walker, 1976; Tardiff, 1973; Brown, 1983; Cooper, 1985; Kulmatycki, 1987), a shifting focus from content to process (Galyean, 1976), and growing attention to student motivation and needs (Rivers, 1983; Cooper, 1985, Kulmatycki , 1987).

A comparison of second language learners with the ASL sample yields several apparent consistencies. Research tells us that reasons for second language study vary widely, and often influence the success of the learning endeavor. Learner motivations may range from an instrumental view of the second language as having practical value, to an integrative desire to identify

with the target population and culture (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Rivers, 1983; Cooper, 1985). Similarly, Chastain (1980) perceives motivation in three forms: cognitive, ego enhancement, and desire for social approval. Some learners want to learn new material. Others are encouraged by the praise and reinforcement, and still others find appeal in the notion of a new social circle.

Second language learner goals, while diverse, generally tend to be practical. Chastain contends that "the only realistic goal in an educational situation is the ability to communicate with a native" (1980: 15). Related goals are career aspirations, travel, intellectual curiosity, or simply a wish for a complete, well-rounded education (Walker, 1976).

A further possible motivating force comes into play with a community that may be viewed as either a disabled/handicapped group or conversely as a linguistic/cultural minority; such is the case with the Deaf community. Often fuelled by a somewhat paternalistic attitude, this type of motivation may be characterized by a well-intentioned, nurturing desire to "help." Several examples were noted in the study sample.

Theme 2: Changing Views of ASL and the Deaf Community

A second descriptive pattern addressed changing views of the target language and community. As learners progressed through their ASL courses, evolving attitudes and perceptions about ASL and the Deaf community were a common experience. According to the literature, faulty assumptions, misconceptions, and stereotypical views of the target cultural/linguistic

community are among potential obstacles to second language learning. Such attitudes not only place the second language instructor at a disadvantage, but increase the learner's difficulty in orienting himself with the target population (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). This problem may be even more evident with minority languages such as ASL.

In the case of ASL and the Deaf community, a further factor is the dearth of information accessible to new learners. As a largely invisible minority only recently designated as a culture, the Deaf community is naturally more vulnerable to pathological versus linguistic labels. Comments offered by most respondents confirmed a basic lack of accurate information at the entry level. It would appear that sketchy knowledge about Deaf people related to a lack of interaction within the community; in this study, respondents who claimed more involvement presented a more highly differentiated view of the people.

Despite apparent strides made during the program by all respondents, misconceptions about ASL as a language inevitably lingered, most notably at the beginning levels. What are the unique features of this highly complex visual motor language? For native speakers of an aural vocal language such as English, ASL is not only a different language but a different modality (Schlesinger, 1978; Klima & Bellugi, 1979). The familiar and habitual use of the auditory vocal channel is replaced by use of the visual motor channel. Language reception occurs exclusively through the visual rather than the auditory sense, and expression is manual rather than verbal.

Grammatical features in ASL differ markedly from those in English. Facial expression may signal either emotion or structure (McIntire & Reilly, 1988). In the latter function, non-manual behaviors mark specific syntactic forms, replace English adverbial phrases and vocal inflections, or accompany certain lexical items. While meaning in English relies on the sequential pattern of words, ASL relies on movement of signs in space. Meaning may be modulated, for instance, by the direction, rate, or repetition of sign movement.

Perceptions of the ASL learning process as surprisingly rapid by several learners suggested a superficial grasp of the language. The significance of non-manual behaviors was, in some cases, limited to a simple affective function, or simply overlooked. Emphasis on hand movements rather than the entirety of facial, manual, and body expression was evident. Given the intricacies of the language, perhaps it is not surprising that an accurate conception would emerge only in later stages of the process.

Cross-cultural studies offer another perspective on the study. Cultural learning is the crux of communicative protocol. As with other second languages, acquiring appropriate cultural behaviors and knowing when and where to apply them is crucial to successful interaction with native language users. Again, Deaf cultural norms rely more heavily on subtle visual rather than vocal cues, and this may pose unforeseen obstacles. While all respondents had at least a superficial grasp of Deaf culture, most admitted to some continuing discomfort in cultural interaction. This barrier was exacerbated

where interaction was minimal. Recent studies (Brown, 1983; Svanes, 1987) strongly suggest that cultural "distance" may play an even more significant role than motivational factors in second language achievement .

Deaf cultural values have emerged from common experiences in the larger community, and similarities to other oppressed minorities are evident. The more advanced participants struggled with the emotion-laden nature of lessons relating to cultural values. According to Triandis (Brislin et al, 1975):

> Effective intercultural relations require 'isomorphic attributions'. Isomorphic attributions correspond to the idea: 'If I had been raised in that culture and had had the kind of experiences that he has had, I would do exactly what he did' (41).

Such ability, if developed, has the potential to make social interactions more rewarding and thus more reinforcing.

In bygone days, the academic realm was perceived as a value-free domain; in more recent years, social scientists claim this is in fact impossible (Spodek, in Landis et al, 1983). Not only is it unrealistic, but it may be potentially detrimental to second language learners. The delicate balance between the affective and cognitive emphases in second language education is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the target culture. Spodek explains it: " 'Value-free' cross-cultural studies may lead to 'value-free' students who are not capable of discriminating among the diverse values of the cultures they study" (Landis et al, 1983: 83). Feasibly, the potential gain of value-laden studies counterbalances the discomfort with the process.

Perhaps an understanding of the reality of "culture shock" in part explains the frustration with target cultural values experienced by some students (Brislin, 1976, 1986; Brown, 1983). According to the literature, the four stages of adjustment to a new culture begin with initial fascination and excitement, followed by discomfort and hostility toward the host culture. Then comes a period of adjustment and gradual recovery, often colored by personal frustration and anxiety, and finally a true sense of biculturalism, through assimilation or adaptation. From my own perceptions as researcher, all of these stages, with the possible exception of the last, were demonstrated to some degree by ASL respondents at different levels of the program. It may be encouraging to look at the global expectation; generally, in cross-cultural experiences "most people successfully overcome barriers to adjustment and consequently develop a self-image of themselves as competent individuals who can understand the viewpoints of people in various parts of the world" (Brislin, 1986: 14).

Theme 3: Transition Between Languages

Another thematic cluster in the study addressed the transition between languages. The indication that certain affective and cognitive features mark the road to competency is upheld in related literature on second language learning. In Chastain's words, "both first- and second-language learners proceed through stages on their way to functional fluency" (1980: 15). Rigidity with the new language, fluctuations in confidence, and the emergence of a pidgin or interlanguage are common to second language pursuits. Not surprisingly,

these were noted as well by members of the study sample.

For some, a pidgin form of the language may satisfy personal objectives. Fossilization of the interim language is possible at any point in the learning process. Chastain explains why:

> New learning simply ceases when the individual has acquired a sufficient mastery of the language to meet his needs. At the point at which he can function as he wants to in his language group and environment, he will rarely make any efforts to progress, and in fact , the argument can be made from a purely practical point of view that there is no need for him to progress further" (1980: 44).

This notion is consistent with remarks by ASL learners who wanted only "basic communication" skills, and reaffirms the pursuit of individual goals.

Findings related to the expressive-receptive gap were puzzling to me to the extent that there were reversed perceptions between novice and senior learners. Based on my experience with interpreter trainees and generally in the interpreting community, reception of ASL is usually deemed the greater obstacle. Several questions come to mind concerning ASL respondents who noted the opposite trend. How accurately did they judge whether or not they understood ASL? Was this perception based only on interaction with ASL instructors in class? In terms of expressive "strength," how did learners judge how well they were understood by Deaf people? Again, was this based only on interaction with the ASL instructors? Or was this phenomenon due in part to the greater adaptability of Deaf people in adjusting to "hearing" signers? This is an area that warrants further investigation.

Theme 4: Barriers to Learning ASL

Barriers to learning ASL comprised the fourth thematic cluster in the study. With few exceptions, analogous findings appear in the literature. Affective variables as a predominant barrier are revealed in a number of second language studies, most notably the diary case studies of recent years (Schumann, 1977; Bailey, 1977, 1983; Rivers, 1983). Chastain summarizes the concern:

> Anxiety is a serious problem in second-language learning. Learners are perched precariously on a linguistic limb where they do not feel comfortable. They are bothered by having to recite in class, and interviews, role-playing, and conversations in the second language are often quite traumatic experiences (1980: 5).

Certainly respondents in this study would concur wholeheartedly.

The problem of inconsistency between classes and instructional styles may simply be a reality of life. Could the former perhaps be resolved through a concerted coordination effort? In terms of standardizing instruction, several thoughts come to mind; ASL teacher training is an obvious one. Unfortunately, access to such teacher training opportunities remains constrained in Canada. Given the perceived excellence of the majority of instruction in this program, however, perhaps peer coaching is another option. Could new instructors gain through observation of seasoned colleagues? Or perhaps by receiving feedback on their teaching from those same colleagues?

A significant barrier unique to visual languages alone appeared in the data of this study - namely, the new demands of a visual language. Where

most second language classes address four developmental areas (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), ASL classes address only two (receiving and expressing). There is no written form of ASL. The extent of adaptation required to learn ASL naturally varies from person to person according to preferred learning styles. According to one recent study, "the basic hurdle for adult L2 learners is to attend to and use faces linguistically, not just communicatively and affectively" (McIntire & Reilly, 1988: 373). Several necessary adjustments noted by ASL respondents included shifting reliance from vocal and auditory to visual and motor channels, developing comfort with facial/body expression and non-manual behaviors, and learning to express thoughts in a spatial rather than sequential form.

Student assessment as a source of frustration was evident for most participants in this study. Perhaps Knowles can shed some understanding on this area. Relating the concern to the self-directed nature of adult learners, he stresses equality between learner and instructor as a necessity in adult education settings, and notes assessment of the former by the latter as "the crowning instance of incongruity" (1970: 43). Why? "Nothing makes an adult feel more childlike than being judged by another adult; it is the ultimate sign of disrespect and dependency, as the one who is being judged experiences it (1970: 43). As a likely solution, Knowles suggests a process of student self-evaluation with instructor input, as a mutual undertaking between the two.

Theme 5: Supports to Learning ASL

Supports to learning ASL paralleled those in most adult education or second language settings. A safe psychological and social environment is an important initial consideration, generally credited in the case of this study to the ASL program instructors. Knowles expands on the concept:

> . . . the psychological climate should be one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported; in which there exists a spirit of mutuality between teachers and students as joint enquirers; in which there is freedom of expression without fear of punishment or ridicule (Knowles, 1970: 41)

Another crucial feature is active involvement in the learning process; this was frequently reiterated in ASL learner comments about the value of the immersion approach, emphasis on communication over form in the classroom, and appreciation of realistic learning activities and informal practice opportunities. Chastain notes the significance of "activation" in learning:

> Without a doubt, it is the most crucial variable in second-language learning. There is no magic about learning a second language; one learns to do what one actually engages in doing. One does not learn to ride a bicycle by looking at the gears or reading a book; nor does one learn to speak a language by doing something else (1980: 7)

Further, Chastain stresses the need for communication with "native" speakers while still in the supportive atmosphere of the classroom. For ASL participants the immersion approach and exposure to a variety of Deaf signers within the program satisfied this need.

Another aspect of the immersion approach merits particular attention. Not only do students benefit from plentiful exposure to the second language, but

from the adaptation of the language to "a language level that is comprehensible to the non-native speaker. . . " (Krashen et al, 1984: 272). According to Krashen, "comprehensible input" is the telling factor in the success of immersion programs; this is consistent with frequent ASL learner plaudits of instructor abilities to meet them on their level.

According to Chastain (1980), learners want satisfaction, real purpose, relevant content, and plentiful opportunity for practice. Mere exposure to a second language environment is not enough to yield conversational fluency (Hatch, 1980). The learner must feel the language is directed at him; otherwise it becomes a moot intellectual exercise. The second language must have personal relevance. This point was reiterated often by respondents in the study.

Desire for relevant activities points to the need for meaningfulness; material perceived as meaningful will be learned more readily and retained longer (Dickinson, 1973). Taking this notion one step further, Chastain (1980) sees meaningfulness as more dependent upon the learner than the material. If the learner is prepared by the knowledge, abilities, and experience he brings to the situation, the learning will be meaningful. Proceeding from the simple to the complex may not always be the optimal learning sequence. According to Chastain, "it is not the simplest material that is learned first, but the material which the learner feels he is most likely to use, for which he feels the strongest need" (1980: 3). The ASL learner request for the sign "bathroom" was an apt example! The challenge for the instructor, then, is to ensure a "fit" between

learner and material; feasibly this demands some understanding of personal learning objectives.

Practice, too, is crucial; the more practice, the better the learning (Dickinson, 1973). Further, practice must be distributed to facilitate periodic rest and reflection. Chastain (1980) refers to internal processing as the method by which the learner incorporates new data with what is already known. This is an active, creative, ongoing process.

Interaction with surroundings is another essential component of second language learning (Chastain, 1980). Reinforcement increases the probability of repeated desirable behaviors (Dickinson, 1973); this may be as simple as a frown or a nod. Another principle, knowledge of results, asserts the learner need for immediate feedback after practice (Dickinson, 1973). For ASL respondents, the primary source of reinforcement and feedback in the formal classroom setting was clearly the instructors; some mentioned peers as well. Informally, Deaf contacts in the larger community offered reinforcement via the success (or perhaps lack of success) of communication attempts.

Theme 6: Personal Growth

A sixth and final pattern addressed the personal growth side effects of the ASL learning experience. As with any adult education setting, unexpected learning is to be expected, and varies according to individuals (Knowles, 1980). In the case of this study, unanticipated learning was broadly perceived as enlightening.

Desired Program Changes

Revisions to the program were suggested by all participants. Discrepancies and occasional outright contradictions apparent in learner suggestions again reflected the presence of a diversity of individual goals and needs. Most of the suggested changes simply reaffirmed significant trends in the ASL learning experience. Students had personal goals for learning ASL and wished to have them considered in the program context. Meaningfulness in terms of activities was a continuing request, along with increased access to practice and feedback on a regular basis. Anxiety and emotional discomfort in both language and cultural areas were acknowledged, and avenues for their reduction suggested.

Learner requests for greater structure and direction for some learning activities may at first appear contradictory to the self-directedness of the andragogical model. However, Davenport & Davenport (1985) caution adult educators against a hasty assumption that older learners are more andragogically-oriented than younger learners; other factors must also be considered. They recommend a blend of pedagogical and andragogical techniques, since most groups will reflect a combination of learner orientations. Knowles reinforces the caution: "Adults typically are not prepared for self-directed learning; they need to go through a process of reorientation to learning as adults - to learn new ways of learning" (1970: 40). Cranton agrees that "adults in a new learning situation or adults returning to 'school' after many

years will be anxious or uncomfortable and will likely demonstrate dependent behaviors" (1989, 17). Illustrations of this phenomenon from the study are readily available, although not at all consistent within the sample. The desire, for instance, to have certain practice opportunities (e.g., Deaf socials) mandated indicated a need for instructor direction. The solution? According to Knowles, instructor adaptation of andragogical principles to the pedagogical model may assuage the concern to some extent. He suggests doing this by:

> . . . providing a climate in which the learners feel more respected, trusted, unthreatened, and cared about; by exposing them to the need to know before instructing them; by giving them some responsibility in choosing methods and resources; and by involving them in sharing responsibility for evaluating their learning Knowles, 1984: 63).

Learner assessment was identified as a final source of concern by ASL respondents in the study, and recommendations for either elimination or alterations to make the process more practical and positive were offered.

The purpose of this study was to examine and clarify the ASL learning experience of the adult learner, and further, to explore avenues through which the learning experience could be enhanced within one community program. Given the size of the response sample, generalization at this stage is realistically constrained. However, by illuminating features of the ASL experience, and by drawing comparisons with related fields such as adult education and second language education, the stage is set for further study; potential areas of research are addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

Summary and Implications

Summary

This study grew from a desire to better understand the experiences of adults learning American Sign Language in a community college general interest program. Illuminating the experience, I hopèd, would provide valuable information not only to the planners of this program and others, but to related fields of study as well. Recognizing the scant nature of present knowledge about this phenomena, I felt a qualitative paradigm would offer the best approach, and chose personal interviews as a primary mode of inquiry.

Following a series of individual interviews with seven current ASL learners, data analysis revealed six descriptive patterns: pursuit of individual goals, changing views of ASL and the Deaf community, the transition between languages, barriers to learning ASL, supports to learning ASL, and personal growth. Additionally, suggested alterations to the program that would further enhance the experience were compiled and categorized.

The first theme, pursuit of individual goals, indicated that respondents had very personal reasons for studying ASL. Some anticipated careers in the field of Deafness, some wanted a new recreational activity, and still others wished for intellectual stimulation.

The second pattern, changing views of ASL and the Deaf community,

addressed knowledge of and attitudes toward the target language, culture, and people. A natural incremental progression was noted as learners moved through the levels. From little or no entry knowledge, some had developed basic awareness, while others struggled with more complex issues at advanced levels of study. The largely invisible nature of the community and a long history of pathological stereotyping coupled to produce some fundamental differences from the experience in spoken second language settings.

The transition between languages, as a third pattern, revealed more analogies to spoken second language learning. The interference of first languages and the development of interlanguage "accents," along with affective reactions of anxiety and frustration shaped the common experience in this area.

Barriers and supports to learning ASL, as the fourth and fifth themes, illuminated both the joys and pain of the learning process. Affective reactions were a primary obstacle, with others such as time constraints and the new demands of a visual language creating further problems. Supports, however, more than counterbalanced the obstacles. Encouragement from instructors, the immersion approach, regular feedback and practice, and personal learning strategies were among features that made the learning process more comfortable and productive.

A final descriptive pattern, personal growth, attested to the unanticipated side effects of learning ASL. Greater tolerance, understanding of a different perspective, and increased confidence and pride were cited as some positive

gains for respondents.

General satisfaction with the ASL program was the consensus of study participants. Suggested revisions centred on further refining an already good system, and reflected a variety of individual preferences and needs.

Implications for Practice

While further investigation is indicated if results of this study are to be generalized, a look at emerging insights may benefit the practice of ASL adult education. Some are explored in this section.

Respondents entered the program with a variety of personal experiences, attitudes to learning, and physical and intellectual attributes. More importantly, all had had their own personal hopes and dreams of what learning ASL would do for them, and these very individual pursuits shaped their entire experience. Sensitivity to such differences is crucial in any adult education setting. Recognition and accommodation of the diversity of needs and goals of adult learners is an implied need in this study. For ASL teacher training programs, this suggests inclusion of adult education principles and strategies for student involvement in setting course objectives and evaluation procedures as necessary course components. It also suggests that a class of learners pursuing interpreting careers might be structured differently from one in which learners are seeking a recreational outlet. Where a program has predetermined objectives for students, these need to be clearly delineated at

the entry level to avoid misleading entrants who may have different interests.

At the same time, program planners and instructors must remain cognizant of the reality that many adult learners have not yet developed a self-directed nature, and that lack of direction may be threatening. These are the learners who need to be guided toward adult learning strategies with care. For instructors, then, the responsibility of meeting learner needs includes implementation of both pedagogical and andragogical principles, as the situation dictates. Flexibility is the key.

In the area of transitional features of the ASL learning process, findings point to clear similarities in related fields, and suggest that much can be learned through reference to second-language and cross-cultural studies. As current components of some ASL teacher training curriculums, these related elements would seem to warrant continuation on a larger scale.

Aside from cited parallels, the ASL experience displays some apparent differences that demand close attention. A thorough appreciation of the difficulties encountered by hearing students coping with the complexities of a visual language, the alien nature of cultural features, and some well-rooted misconceptions about the community is requisite in ASL programs. While research in the field is still in its infancy, ASL program implementers must be encouraged to remain abreast of new developments for the sake of their students. How? A first step for any such undertaking is collaboration with experienced Deaf instructors and researchers, as is well demonstrated in the

instance of this community college program.

Learners in the study gave resounding support to program features that made their personal learning experience richer, and these become more significant as an indication of what works. Immersion in the target language, exposure to instructors who are native signers, the study of culture, and regular opportunities for informal interaction in the Deaf community are relatively innovative and clearly positive trends. This particular college program, as one that remains current and progressive in a rapidly growing new field, could well serve as an exemplar to related and prospective ASL programs.

Aside from feasible practical application of findings, this study points to a need for further investigation in the field of ASL education. Suggested areas of research will be the focus of the next section.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study indicate the potential benefit of further research into the area of adult ASL education. Investigation of questions such as the following may shed more understanding on this new discipline. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches could be included.

1. A longitudinal case study could feasibly delve further into the learning process and perhaps pinpoint expected fluctuations along the way. This may be one way to ascertain reasons for undue attrition in the early stages.

2. How common are the experiences of subjects in this study? Are

findings consistent with the experiences of other learners in the same community program, or in similar programs? Quantitative measures of a broader scope would provide greater generalizability.

3. How would the formal ASL learning experience differ for learners having Deaf parents? Based on my own background, and knowledge of others in the same situation, there may well be significant differences of either a positive or negative nature.

4. How do program objectives as perceived by learners compare to those perceived by program instructors and administration?

5. How realistically do ASL learners assess their own skill levels? On what measures do they base their self-evaluations?

6. Do personal learning strategies cited by learners in fact correlate with higher ASL achievement? How do strategies differ between successful and unsuccessful learners?

7. What are the factors behind learner anxiety in ASL classes, and how might they be resolved or alleviated?

8. What is the relationship between cultural "distance" and level of ASL proficiency achieved?

9. Does fluency in more than one spoken language correlate with higher achievement in ASL?

10. Is there a correlation between ASL achievement and instructor reinforcement in class?

11. What is the relationship between ASL proficiency and interaction with Deaf people outside the class setting?

12. Can the spatial sense be developed?

Personal Reflections

For me, looking back on the past months of research reinforces my own sense of unexpected learning and growth. I learned not only about my subjects but about myself. As an interviewer looking back on the interview process, I found that my own learning process in some ways resembled that of my ASL subjects. Initial uncertainty was reflected in over-reliance on the interview guide, leading occasionally to needless repetition. Given my natural anxiety about setting respondents at ease, I consciously struggled against being overly encouraging, responding too affirmatively to their comments, or "leading" in any way. There seemed to be a natural progression as we got to know each other. As I became more comfortable with my respondents and they with me, I found that I questioned less, commented less, listened more, and offered subjects longer pauses for reflection and responses, with positive results. Despite the awkward beginnings, I felt my own transition was a valuable learning experience for me, and that it did not unduly disrupt the research process.

I am grateful to the seven learners who allowed me into their lives for a short time to explore with them their unique learning experiences. Not only did they provide information about their learning, they offered a candid glimpse of

the very personal side of the story - the frustrations, the uncertainties, and the pride and exhileration of learning. I realized early that two or three encounters was enough only for a fleeting snapshot of the whole story. Timing was all-important; often I had the sense that if my visit came shortly after a very positive or very negative stage of the learning, this feeling shadowed the entire session. Despite committed efforts to verify information at later dates, I cannot help but wonder how the story would differ if I had been able to follow learners more closely and frequently over the term, or better yet, over the entire four or five levels of the program. The experience is far from static, and the fluctuations are a telling part of the story.

To a large extent, I felt I vicariously experienced the joys and uncertainties of participants as they shared their thoughts and insights with me. One learner likened the ASL learning experience to learning a sport, and I found this analogy apt in many ways. For this learner, the motivating factor was similar in both areas - to be challenged, and to have fun. There were rules to follow, and mistakes were an important part of the learning. You struggled to do it right, and became tense when you didn't, but you didn't expect it to be easy. When you fell down, you got up and tried again. Practice, practice, and more practice ultimately synchronized the moves, and team interaction reinforced that you were doing it right. At some point, the moves became automatic and success was then its own reward.

To follow up on the thoughts of another respondent, who saw public

awareness as a reasonable and worthy objective for the program, perhaps the global perspective is the most enlightening of all. In learning a second language such as this, people learn to communicate with others, to share their thoughts, open their minds, to understand new viewpoints, appreciate foreign cultures, to disclaim hurtful stereotypes and acquire the tools for further growth. Is this not the ultimate vision of true education?

ASL education is an exciting new discipline within the field of adult education. It is my sincere hope that it will continue to expand and thrive, and that this study has contributed, if only minutely, to its continued development in community education.

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APPENDIX A

Time Line

Activity	Completion Date
Ethical approval by ASL program at GMCC	Nov 30/90
Submission of proposal	Dec 15/90
Ethical approval by ACT Department	Dec 31/90
Design of interview format	Dec 31/90
Approval of proposal	Jan 15/91
Pilot study	Jan 31/91
Data collection and analysis	Apr 30/91
Writing of findings	June 15/91
Submission of completed thesis	June 30/91
Feedback from committee	July 15/91
Revisions	July 31/91
Completion of thesis	Aug 31/91

APPENDIX B

Letter to Potential Participants

January 24, 1990

Dear

I am presently doing a research study, approved by the GMCC ASL program, to explore the experiences of hearing adults who are learning ASL. You have been suggested by your instructor as a possible participant in the study. If you are interested, I would like to contact you personally to discuss details further.

I am interested in interviewing a small number of current learners who have taken all previous levels in the GMCC program. If you fall into this category, and if you would be willing to share some of your personal thoughts and feelings about your learning with me, please indicate below and return this form to your instructor before the end of tonight's class.

For those who do take part, please be assured that all information will be treated confidentially. Participation is completely voluntary and you may drop out of the project at any time.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Patricia Conrad

____ No, I am not interested.

____ Yes, I am interested.

If yes, please provide phone number _____

When is the best time to call you? _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Entry Status & Subsequent Changes:

What was your level of readiness to learn ASL on entry into the program? Can you speak about prior exposure to Deafness, ASL skills, and other preparation?

What prompted you to take ASL classes?

What were your initial assumptions about ASL, Deafness, and Deaf culture?

What were your goals for the program? Why did you want to learn ASL?

What are the changes to your assumptions? To your goals?

The Learning Process:

When did you first see ASL as a distinct language?

What's different than you had expected about the learning process? Has there been any unexpected learning?

How do you react to making mistakes in ASL?

What are some of the barriers to your learning of ASL - either personal or program-related?

Under what conditions do you feel you can best learn ASL?

What are some of the strategies you use to help you learn ASL more effectively - in and out of class?

Describe your use of resources (such as tutors and videotapes). How helpful are they?

Self-Assessment of Achievement:

How would you describe your comprehension of ASL? Deaf people's understanding of your ASL? Your ability to converse in ASL?

How do you feel when interacting with Deaf users of ASL?

What are your successes and failures so far?

What do you feel will stay with you about this learning experience? What's been the most significant learning for you?

Reaction to Program & Desired Changes:

How do you feel about the immersion approach in class? About having Deaf instructors? About having Deaf models in class?

How do you feel about the class pacing and level of challenge?

What opportunities do you have to use ASL and experience the culture?

How do you feel about your class instruction? About the way your learning is assessed?

What's most frustrating/exciting about this learning experience?

What do you like best/least about the learning activities, assignments, and materials?

Are there some things that are important to you that the program hasn't provided yet? What do you still want from your classes?

What changes would you like to see? What would make the program more useful or satisfying to you?

How would you sum up your ASL learning experience?

APPENDIX D

Learner Variables

Name: _____ Phone No: _____

LEVEL: 1 2 3 4

GENDER: Male Female

AGE GROUP: Under 20 20-30 30-40 Over 40

ORIGIN: Canadian Other: _____

LANGUAGES: English only English plus: _____

EXPOSURE TO DEAFNESS UPON PROGRAM ENTRY:

Deaf family member

No exposure to Deafness

1 or 2 Deaf contacts

Many Deaf contacts

AVAILABLE TIMES FOR INTERVIEWS: _____

APPENDIX E

Participant Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the experience of learning ASL from the perspective of adult learners in the ASL program at GMCC. The primary mode of inquiry will be personal interviews.

The following guidelines will apply to the study:

1) Participants will take part in the study voluntarily.

2) Findings will be treated confidentially, and personal identities will be protected. Specific information about individuals will not be shared with others by the researcher.

3) Where interviews are tape-recorded, it will be done with the permission of participants. The researcher will be the only person with access to taped interviews, except for members of the University thesis committee who may hear selected portions of interviews as examples/illustrations of findings. Tapes will be destroyed after the study is completed.

4) Upon completion of the study, one complete copy will be made available to the Projects Manager of the ASL program at GMCC. As well, a summary of findings will be provided to all participants and instructors.

I, _____, understand and accept the above guidelines, and am willing to participate in the proposed study.

_____ _____

(Signature) (Date)